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ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

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WHITE WHALES, RAINTREES, FLYING SAUCERS . . .

Parables travel in parabolas. And science-fantasy, being in essence a *parabolic* form, can shoot over barriers which often stop the flight of earthbound *straight* fiction. It adopts certain modes of presentation forbidden to the mainstream of literature and thus strikes us harder with its insight.

Any good story, science-fantasy or not, creates order out of the chaos of this universe, and invests it with a meaning we the readers had not noticed before. Entertainment, always a necessary element in any good story, comes from the slight and pleasant shock of having our awareness-threshold raised by the author's skill in shaping new patterns of value for us.

Our problem is, can s-f fit the definition of good fiction, as given in the above paragraph? Can s-f wave its magic wand and conjure from chaos a meaningful, value-laden picture?

Answer: yes . . . Any bad fiction, no matter the *genre,* is a wild exercise of the imagination which explodes in the night of our minds, makes garish pyrotechnics, then dies, leaving the night blacker than before. But good fiction is a steady light—even if sometimes a small one. By it we walk without stumbling, and we may return at any time to see under its flare other topographical features we did not understand the first trip.

Thus, a story that deals with unicorns and virgins, demons and wizards, rockets to Mars, self-conscious robots, or other mythical creatures and creations is not necessarily bad fiction because it uses devices that we know do not exist. If the story clenches a hard core of truth or flashes a facet of life not realized before, it is good. And its magical paraphernalia, far from obscuring its goodness and truth, is the very thing that brings them out. It makes it more than just a jag of fancy. It demonstrates beyond disproof that we are mad if we pursue the White Whale to our destruction; that even if we do find the lost raintree we'll lose it at once unless we keep our innocence; that flying saucers may equate the remoteness of stars with the abyss of loneliness between each human; that if you do not put a perfect trust in the one you love you will make her less than human and in the end kill her; and that even if you can't possess the moon yourself you can have no greater love than to break your heart getting it for others.

And, always, a good story, s-f or no, shows you a hero with whom you can identify. Win or lose, he wrestles with a giant whose mask, no matter how fantastic, conceals our arch-friend or arch-fiend, our recognizable universe.

PHILIP JOSE FARMER.

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the rations of tantalus

by . . . Margaret St. Clair

If you're thinking of tempting Tantalus—stop, and consider! You may be digging your grave.

THE SOFT CLAMOR of the day-gong filled the room. Mara opened her gray eyes and smiled at him. She was, as always, beautiful. Harvey looked at her without either tenderness or desire before he reached across automatically and kissed her. Then he got up. They had lain side by side for nearly a thousand nights and except for a handful of times in the first year of their marriage nothing had ever happened. Love was beautiful, wholesome, lovely, a wonderful experience. So they both thought. But somehow . . . and then, love might have rumpled the bed.

The notes of the day-gong began to die away. The room grew lighter as the solar installations under the dome were turned on one by one. Harvey felt a brief curiosity as to what the weather in the undomed areas, the real actual weather outside, might be. He dismissed the thought as meaningless. It didn't matter what the *real* weather was. Man made his climate nowadays.

"You'd better get up, dear," he said to Mara. They were both

Like Robert Bloch and Frank Belknap Long, Margaret St. Clair followed somewhat in the footsteps of the late, great Howard Phillips Lovecraft. She dedicated much of her early talent to the horror story. Then, having acquired an enviable reputation in that field, she turned to science fiction. Her stories breathe freshness and originality, and her insight into the psychology of alien life forms has seemed uncanny to many!

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smiling. "You'll be late to work."

"Yes, dear."

In his own bathroom Harvey began his daily ritual of bathing and grooming. He cleaned his toenails and fingernails, brushed his teeth, gargled, swabbed out his nostrils and his ears. He stepped on the scales and saw that he had gained two grams since yesterday. Then he turned on the vapor-bath and stood within it for five minutes and let a soft pink cleansing rain beat soothingly against him. He finished by turning a cloud of pine-scented cologne on himself.

When he stepped out of the bath he was already dry. He went to the medicine locker and opened it. This was the moment he had been dreading, the moment that would remind him of how short he was of euph pills.

He had plenty of the other tablets, of course. He and Mara, like everyone else, took a good many tablets every day. There were pills to check odor, pills for hairlessness, pills—in her case—to repress the less aesthetic phases of the feminine sexual cycle entirely. There were pills to alter the metabolism so that sweating was no longer a physiological necessity. Green, pink, brown and white. And of course there were the ordinary pills, for euphoria, that everyone took all the time. They were turquoise blue.

Harvey swallowed his other pills and stood hesitating with his hand on the cap of the euph pill bottle. He had been afraid to count yesterday. But he might as well know. He pulled out the cap and tipped the turquoise-blue little darlings out into his hand. There were only three. Three. It was worse than he had thought. It was six days until his next ration period at the end of the month.

Why did the authorities ration them? Everyone said—it was repeated at one from all sides daily—that they were perfectly harmless. They made you feel good, relaxed you, made you think life was worth living. And they were the only things that helped in combatting the Rages.

If you felt a Rage coming on, you took a euph and you probably didn't have it. Yet the pills were strictly rationed, one pill a day for each adult, every twenty-eight days, and if you ran out before then you did without. Why?

It was one of his faults that he was always asking questions. He must try to correct it. People didn't like you if you went around questioning.

And he was too aggressive. That was harder to eliminate than a tendency to ask too many questions. For a moment he wondered whether his aggressiveness had anything to do with his proneness to the Rages. He didn't think so. Lots of people had Rages—everybody had them now and then, there were Rage-covers all

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over the populous parts of town —and they weren't all aggressive people by any means. No, the Rages weren't his fault.

It wasn't the Rages, of course, that one feared at bottom. The sensation of blacking-out, of helplessness, of misery and confusion, was bad enough. But it was what the Rages led to—the final thing, the . . . he wasn't going to think about it. Mental hygiene required that one have only pleasant thoughts.

He stood staring down at the blue euph pills in his hand, his shoulders hunched. He wanted one of them badly—he felt a trembling desire for it. But his dilemma remained. Three pills, six days. Six days, three pills. What was he to do?

At last he dropped the pills back in the bottle. He capped it, sighing. No euph pill today, one tomorrow. None the next. And so on until the end of the month. He'd have to stand it. He'd have to make it do.

The coral-colored bell-box on the wall chimed softly. That meant Mara was ready and waiting for him. He pressed a stud in answer and got a fresh coverall from the clothes locker. As he slid his legs into the pleasantly warm, translucent fabric, he wondered whether he dared try the number Killinan had given him.

He had called it in his last ration period and got ten extra euph pills from it. But the character of the transaction—the veiled anonymous voice, the waiting on the corner at noon, the deft way in which money and pills had changed hands—had made him feel apprehensive and guilty for days.

Killinan was too different, too queer. Harvey didn't want to be like him. He'd make his euph pill ration do.

Mara was waiting for him in the foyer of the apartment. Her platinum hair was dressed in long plaits and she was wearing a transparent tunic of rich turquoise-blue euplast. For a moment the color filled Harvey with a profound pleasure. He could not imagine why. Then he understood. The tunic was the exact shade of euphoria pills.

Mara smiled at him. He took her hand and squeezed it. Today was the monthly anniversary of the day on which they had been married. He must remember to send her some flowers.

They left the apartment and started down to the breakfast hall, still hand in hand. Mara chattered constantly in her light, gay voice. He listened to her, he held her hand, without any particular emotion.

But when she withdrew her hand from his for a moment to rearrange her hair he clutched after it in near panic. He drew a deep breath of relief when he was once more holding it in his.

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They left the elevator and entered the breakfast hall. It was a big, airy, many-windowed room, finished in a soothing gray. At this hour it was almost full. Harvey and his wife sat down in their accustomed places. Harvey spoke their orders into a robot waiter's receptive ear.

They waited. Mara kept on talking. Harvey felt a sudden chill breath of apprehension. If breakfast was late . . . he had found again and again that trivial frustrations—meals delayed, papers mislaid in his office, having to wait for transportation—would touch off Rages in him.

He looked up at the ceiling wondering, for the dozenth time, why no Rage-covers had been installed in the big room. It was short-sighted of the management not to have them in a room where so many people congregated.

Somebody had had a Rage only the other morning here, and all the spectators had been able to do was to throw a length of cloth from one of the tables over him. It was most offensive to be exposed to seeing anyone in Rage.

He was beginning to tremble. He felt the first horrid knife-edge of uncontrol touch him. With a wild effort he drew away from it. Breakfast was coming, breakfast would soon be here. He'd hold on to that thought. He couldn't expose Mara to anything as unpleasant as seeing him in Rage.

The waiter stopped by them with a load of dishes. He put purée of egg in front of Harvey, cereal cream before Mara. He poured theo for both of them.

Harvey raised the steaming cup to his lips with gratitude. Maybe things were going to be all right. Breakfast had come and he hadn't offended Mara.

He hadn't—and it might be an omen for the whole day—he hadn't had a Rage.

II

Harvey always walked to work. This morning, as he strode along briskly, he found he was feeling pretty good. As good as if he'd had a euph pill? No, of course not, but it wasn't much of an effort for him to look happy and keep smiling. It didn't make him feel, as it sometimes did, that his eyes were aching and the muscles of his face were locked.

He reached his building—he worked in the photographic reduction division of an enterprise that specialized in out-size diffraction gratings—and turned in. As he entered the main office James, his immediate superior, raised his head and nodded and smiled at him. Harvey found his face crinkling in automatic response, but when he turned away he felt that his forehead had contracted savagely.

He made himself relax. What was the matter with him, anyway? James was an excellent boss, very fair-minded and, if his smiles

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seemed a little tight, his comments on Harvey's work sarcastic rather than witty, it was only because Harvey was over-sensitive. James was a wonderful person, really. *But was he, Harvey, wonderful? Now, none of that!*

He entered his office. He looked over the stack of papers that had been delivered by the telechute and then began to scan the latest reduction of the forty-five-inch grating everyone in the enterprise was working on. He tried it under higher and higher mag. At last he relaxed with a grunt. It was perfect. He didn't think James himself could find anything wrong with it. He scrawled his initials and OK on the edge of the slide.

He examined two more gratings, smaller ones, clipped a sheet of instructions and comments to the prints, hesitated. Then he opened his inro case and took a green and a white pill. His fingers went involuntarily to the space of euphs before he realized its emptiness. He sighed.

A little after ten James came in. "I wanted to tell you that the latest blow-up for the twenty-seven incher shows some raggedness on the left," he said. He was not looking at Harvey. "Better see if you can get it out."

Harvey had already checked the slide but he nodded agreeably. "That wasn't what I came in to speak to you about primarily though," James went on. Now he looked at Harvey. There seemed to be a special tightness and dryness in the quality of his smile. "I just had a call for you from a Hostel," he said.

A Hostel. The word seemed to burn through Harvey's mind and yet, for the moment, to be without meaning. A Hostel. *A Hostel.* A Hostel was where you went when you had too many Rages—when, one time, the cover didn't lift afterwards, when it was hopeless. You went there. You stayed there. You never came out. *A Hostel.*

"A call from a Hostel? For *me?*" he asked. He hoped his face, his voice, were calm.

"Yes. It seems a man named Killinan, who went there recently, had written your name in the *Whom To Notify.* They want you to come in and discuss his case with them. I imagine it's a matter of disposal of property or some such question.

"The doctor who spoke to me was quite urgent. I didn't know whether you'd want to visit the place or not. Going to a Hostel is such a hairy"—James laughed as if apologizing for the mild obscenity—"is such a hairy idea. But as I say, he was urgent. If you want to go I'll let you have the rest of the day off."

Harvey opened his mouth to say no. James was looking at him directly and strangely. If he said, "No, I'm not interested," how would it seem? That he was

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afraid? That he had some personal reason for disliking a visit to a Hostel?

"Oh, I'll go, of course," he said heartily. "Killinan was a friend of mine. Not a very close friend, of course. He was rather a queer duck. But still . . ."

"Yes, I thought you'd feel that way," James said, relaxing. "The Hostel's out in the Greenways, beyond seventy-eighth. As I said, you can have the rest of the day off." He left the office.

When he was safely gone Harvey covered his face with his hands. He wanted to whimper and cry. A visit to a Hostel? Today? When he was feeling so—when everything he saw would remind him of—how could he stand it? It seemed a gratuitous piece of cruelty on the part of Fate to confront him with just what he feared.

He'd have to stand it. James was expecting it of him. Besides—Harvey took his hands from his face and blinked as an idea came to him—besides, a Hostel might be just the place to get extra euph pills. It stood to reason that they'd use a great many of them. And where there was a plentiful supply. . . .

He began to straighten up his desk before leaving. Suddenly he was whistling. Too bad about Killinan. Why *Killinan?* With his supply of tablets, his relaxed attitude generally, he was the last person Harvey would have thought of in connection with a really serious Rage. But then, he'd always been a queer duck. It was the right thing to do, for Harvey to go see him and see if he could help.

The Hostel, as James had said, was out in the Greenways. It was a small, white, harmless-looking building with low wings, framed in dark-leaved shrubbery. The lawn before it was dotted with pink flowers. Harvey put the money for his fare in the box of the robot pilot of the hillercopt and walked up the path to the building's front door.

The door swung open in front of him. He stepped into a hall filled with a glimmer of pale green coruscating light. Fluor panels, he thought, though he had never seen them of just that color before. He went over to the desk, pressed a stud and waited.

After a moment a nurse, dressed in a heavy coverall of opaque green, appeared. "My name's Harvey," he told her pleasantly. "I was asked to call in connection with a man named Killinan."

"Oh yes." She smiled. "What we were hoping was that you'd consent to have a little talk with him—with Mr. Killinan, I mean. We'd take a recording of it and Doctor thought that by studying it he might be able to get a little light on his case.

"Although—" for a moment her smile slipped, to be pinned in

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place again more brightly than before— "it's pretty difficult to find anything that *does* help, as Doctor says. But we try."

Harvey made a noncommittal noise. He hoped his face did not show how shocking the nurse's suggestion seemed to him.

"After your interview with Mr. Killinan," the nurse went on, "Doctor was hoping you'd give him your impressions of the patient when he was well and so on. There's also the question of what to do with some property. Of course, interviews with—with disturbed persons aren't very *pleasant*. But as I say, we hoped you'd try."

Harvey licked his lips and swallowed. "Of course," he said. "I'd be glad to. Of course."

"Oh, that's good. I'll have to prepare Mr. Killinan. He's—pretty disturbed. But it won't take long."

She came out from behind the desk and went down a corridor. Harvey followed her with his eyes. There was a half-open door some twenty feet down the corridor. He was curious about it.

When the nurse was out of sight he walked softly and quickly down the hall to the door. He opened it a little farther. He looked inside.

He saw a small square office with a desk. Medical books and journals and boxes of microfilms. Beyond the office another door, also open. He caught a glimpse of many bottles and jars. The far room seemed to be a dispensary.

He craned his neck and stared. His heart was beating with sudden hope. Because if it was a dispensary—in one of those bottles there might be . . . Did he not, around the edge of the door, catch a glimpse of the unmistakable turquoise blue of euphoria pills?

He drew a shuddering breath. They wouldn't count the pills in a bottle like that, would they? A great big jar? If he were to slip in quietly he could take a handful, a whole handful—enough for months and months. For *months!*

He heard footsteps. His eyes moved. On the balls of his feet he ran back to the desk in the reception hall. He was standing at ease, with his hands clasped carelessly behind his back, when the nurse reappeared.

"He's ready now," she said, smiling. "This way."

She led him along the corridor, past the half-open door—*steady*—and up a ramp. They turned. The walls here sparkled with faint blue. She pushed a button. A panel opened in the apparently solid wall.

"Mr. Killinan's in there," she said. "You don't need to worry about disturbing him. He's had sedation. Ask him questions. Get him to express himself. As I told you, your conversation is going on tape."

Harvey nodded. He felt so full of sudden sharp resentment at

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what he was being asked to endure that he feared his face would give him away. He kept his eyes down.

Killinan was standing beside a small round table. He was clothed from neck to ankle in an opaque white coverall. For a moment Harvey was puzzled, seeing no sign of disturbance in his attitude or bearing. Then he noticed the peculiar liveliness of his face.

It was a face that had fractured into fifty pieces. Each piece had become autonomous. Muscles twitched, tissue quivered, an eyebrow raised, a pad of fat sagged or jumped. The outline, the bony structure, were still Killinan's. But the central organization, the controlling governor, had gone.

"Hello, Bob, I mean Bill," Killinan said. His voice was unsteady but loud. "They told me you wanted to talk to me. Won't you sit down?"

"All right." Harvey's knees felt soft. He was glad to seat himself in one of the room's two straight chairs.

Killinan had not looked at him when he addressed him. Still looking off to one side, he giggled. Then he seated himself on the floor. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Abel?" he asked.

"I—unh—why, they said you had something to say to *me*."

"Oh, I have." Killinan leaned forward and regarded his toes intimately. "I doubt you'd be interested in hearing it though."

"I am—very much interested. Anything you want to say."

"Then you're different from the waitresses in this establishment. The stewards are the worst. Always sick."

Harvey felt a wave of panic. He chewed on his lips. "Please tell me," he said at last. "You know I'm interested in you."

"Hunh. Well, I guess maybe you are. Listen, Bob. It's about the dogs."

"Here?" Harvey ventured cautiously.

"No, of course not. What a fool you are! But they're coming back."

His wavering voice spoke the last words so vividly that Harvey looked behind him, expecting the nurse to be entering the room. There was no one, of course. The wall remained an unbroken fluor panel of soft blue.

"Don't you understand?" Killinan said. He looked up from his feet momentarily, his eyes fixed a little to the right of Harvey's head. *"The dogs are coming back."*

"What dogs are those?" asked Harvey. "Tell me all about them." He was conscious, as he spoke, of the insincerity of what he was saying. He gave a choking cough.

"What dogs? Oh, the ones we drove out of civilization. Long ago." Killinan put his hands to his head. "It hurts. It *does* hurt," he said plaintively. "It hurts all the time, Harry. But nobody pays any attention to me here."

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"I'm sure they're trying to help you," Harvey replied. He shifted in his seat. "You were telling me about the dogs."

"The—yes. They're like mastiffs, you know, Harry. Big red dogs with smooth short hair. We drove them out a long time ago and everything in the world has been put up to keep them back. But the barriers are not strong enough. They'll get through. Ohhhh, yes. *Through!*"

"What—what makes them dangerous? The dogs, I mean."

"It's because they have such keen scent," Killinan answered. "They can smell anything. And they can hear noises we can't hear. That's why we're afraid of them." He began to cry. After a moment he crawled over to the table and sat down under it.

"What's the matter?" Harvey asked. He drew a deep breath. "Nothing's going to hurt you. Come on out from under there."

There was no answer. Killinan kept on weeping. There was a discreet tap on the wall panel. The nurse in the green coverall came in.

"There's no use going on with it," she said, looking down at her patient. "Once he starts crying he'll go on like that for days. I'm sorry, Mr. Harvey. It can't have been very pleasant for you." Her expression was depressed but when she saw that Harvey was watching her she smiled.

"Now, if you don't mind, Doctor would like to talk to you," she continued. "This way."

She led him back along the corridor and it was as he had scarcely dared to hope—she took him to the office from which the dispensary opened. There was no one in the room.

"Dr. Frazier will be here in a minute," she said as she left.

Harvey felt dizzy with rapture. But he wasn't, after all, quick enough. Before he could do more than go to the door of the dispensary there was a rustle in the hall. Dr. Frazier came in. He was a small dark man whose smile showed a mouthful of white teeth. "How do you do, Mr. Harvey?" he said. "I see you're admiring our dispensary. Won't you sit down?"

Harvey obeyed. For a moment his disappointment made him quite sick. Fortunately the doctor was speaking to him.

"How long have you known Killinan, Mr. Harvey?" he asked. "Is he a close friend of yours?"

"No—more of an acquaintance. I haven't known him for more than a couple of years." This was quite true.

The doctor put down the paper he had been looking at and sighed. "I listened to your talk with him," he said. "There was nothing new. That stuff about the dogs was what he's been telling us all along. We'd hoped . . . It's too bad you don't know him very well."

"Yes. I don't think he had

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any intimate friends. Do you mean there's not much chance for him?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, once a man's had a—a really final Rage there are structural brain changes. We don't know yet what causes them, or how to neutralize them. Surgery has been absolutely useless and psychotherapy only a little less so. The psychotherapy was what we hoped you could help us with. But. . . ." He picked up a pencil and sighed again. Then he smiled.

Harvey decided to venture. "What causes the Rages, anyway?" he asked.

"The cause of the Rages?" The doctor looked down. "Well, it's a little hard to say. Plenty of research is being done on the problem. But when we consider that all other forms of mental illness except that one sort have been eliminated—well, we don't need to let our ignorance, which is only temporary, distress us too much, do we?" He looked up pleasantly.

"No, I suppose not. Of course, I'm only a layman. But wouldn't it—I understand euphoria pills are a specific for the Rages—wouldn't it be a good idea if the ration of euphoria pills were increased?"

Dr. Frazier smiled winningly. "Perhaps."

"Then—well, why isn't it?"

Dr. Frazier held up a hand in warning. "Now, now!" he said playfully. "I'm only an MD, not a politico. I don't have anything to do with the policies of the Medical Division of government. You mustn't ask me a thing like that."

"Oh."

"No, I don't have anything to do with it," Dr. Frazier repeated. His grin was almost fierce. "If I did—but I mustn't discuss that. Do you have any idea what your friend Killinan would like done with his property?"

"Ah—he said once that he was interested in research projects."

"That might be a good way out of it."

They discussed Killinan's assets a little longer, Harvey simulating an interest he did not feel. Then Dr. Frazier rose from his desk and held out his hand. "Good-by, Mr. Harvey," he said. "I enjoyed meeting you. I'm sorry we can't be more hopeful about your friend."

"Yes. Good-by."

Harvey went out.

III

He decided to walk back to town. He was feeling miserable. Perhaps the exercise would help. But by now he was almost certain he had a Rage coming on—the interview at the Hostel had been as bad as anything could have been for him. And when a Rage gave warning so long in advance, it was almost certain to be serious. Oh, Lord! He was frightened. What was to become of him?

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Suddenly he remembered. He could call the number Killinan—better not think about *him*—had given him. The guilt and apprehension he had felt about it last time didn't seem to matter. He had to have the pills.

He got to a callbox at the edge of the Greenways and rang. The buzzing went on for a long, long time. At last the operator said, smiling brightly, that the subscriber had moved out and not requested another number. There wasn't anybody at that number any more.

Harvey nodded. He managed to leave the callbox and walk on in the right direction. There wasn't, really, any help for it.

At last he looked up. He had reached a part of town where there were covers. Overhead he saw their soft, weightless, choking bulk. And the Rage was coming on. He felt its rushing fury touch his edges. For a moment longer he resisted, trembling. Killinan, hiding under the table . . . and the structural changes . . . but the Rage was imperative. Whatever happened he couldn't help it. Almost with relief he gave himself up to it.

He became aware of himself much later. The cover had lifted. He was lying on the rubberoid. No one was looking at him.

Cautiously he felt over his body. No, he was all right. He hadn't bitten his tongue, he hadn't even bruised or scratched himself. But it had been a bad Rage. The fury, the screaming. . . . He was lucky it hadn't been final. Perhaps next time, or the next. . . .

All the same, he felt better. He was safe at least for a day or two. And he had three euph pills left at home. One tomorrow, none the next, one the day after. And so on. And then it would be the end of the month and another euph ration coming up.

But what about the end of the next ration period? Will it be the same thing all over again? Oh, hair on it! The end of the next period was a long way off!

He got to his feet. His knees were shaky and his body felt empty and weak. A Rage always left one feeling like that. Besides, he was probably hungry. It must be nearly noon. He'd get something to eat.

Ahead of him on the walk a big three-dimension image of a blond girl began to cavort and prance. She was wearing almost nothing—advertising images used a high degree of nudity—and as she bounced she sang something in a husky voice about love. What was she advertising? Pills, probably. Yes, it was a combined sleeping, deodorant and diuretic tablet. Nobody on the street was paying any attention to her.

Harvey walked up to her and through her with the long inelastic step of post-Rage. He thought, *If they want me to look at her—*

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me and everyone else around here —she ought to be pouring out a stream of bright blue pills from a bottle. A big bottle of bright blue euph pills. He must remember to send Mara some flowers.

He walked on. A man with a Nem beside him went by. Harvey looked away, disliking the weary patience on the man's face. It wasn't Harvey's fault if people insisted on being anti-social and offensive. He didn't want to feel sorry for the man. He forced himself to concentrate on his own need for something to eat.

There was an eating place in the next block with a vacant store on either side. Since menus and food preparation were pretty much standard everywhere, it didn't matter whether he ate here or somewhere else and he liked the looks of the shop well enough. There wasn't quite so much glass, so many mirrors, as in some and the fluor panels were a restful shade of deep green. He went in.

The shop was full of talking, smiling people. He was disagreeably conscious of his own stiff, inelastic face—another sign of post-Rage. But nobody was looking at him. He walked on, toward the back, and finally found an empty booth. He seated himself on a deep, soft bench.

His weight made the slot in the table open. A menu plate shot up. He examined it.

He decided on pulverized chicken—"creamier, smoother, blander"—bran muffins for bulk and a double glass of comminuted vegetable juice. He took the stylus and punched the menu card in the appropriate spots.

The lighting in the booth was subdued and restful. Harvey closed his eyes for a moment. Then he settled back against the seat with a sigh. An unexpected pressure against his upper leg made him look down. His thigh was resting against a small hard cylinder.

It was about the shape of, the size of . . . He picked it up, his heart thumping. And it was. It *was!*

After so many false hopes, so many disappointed expectations, after the Hostel, the doctor, the Rage, he was holding an unopened bottle of euph pills, a whole month's ration, between his hands.

Blue, blue and wonderful! There were twenty-eight pills in the bottle. Somebody hadn't even cared enough about his ration to open it.

He wasn't going to wait any longer. If Mr.—Munro, said the label on the bottle—hadn't wanted his ration, Harvey did. Finders keepers. He broke the seal, uncapped the bottle, shook out two pills. With a luxurious sense of delaying, he dropped one back in the bottle. He'd take it a little later. He swallowed the other. Then he sat, holding the bottle in both hands in expectant happiness.

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Almost immediately the euph pill took hold. His spirits rose, the tension left his thighs. What had he been so unhappy about? Why, life was wonderful! And he had twenty-seven more pills.

He started to drop the bottle in his pocket, smiling. A voice above him spoke politely but warningly. "Excuse me but I think you've got my euph pills."

Harvey was horribly startled. He felt the happiness, the security, draining away from him. With anguish, he tried to detain them. Maybe the man was lying and they weren't his pills at all. "What's your name?" he said.

"Munro. You know, there's no use pretending you haven't got them. I can see them in your hand."

Guilt betrayed him. Or was it compliancy from the euphoria pill he had taken? Slowly, without looking at Munro, he unclosed his hand. The other man took the bottle of pills from him.

There was a soft plop as the slit in the table opened. Harvey's lunch slid over the surface to him. He looked at it for a moment and then averted his eyes. How could he ever have thought he wanted to eat?

He wouldn't have a Rage, anyhow. It was too soon after the last one.

Munro was frowning down at him. "Are you sick?" he asked. "I'm sorry. But you know, they *are* my pills. I see you opened them."

"Yes. Please go away."

"Oh!" Munro sat down at the table. When the menu plate popped out he punched with the stylus for a cup of theo. "I guess you needed the pills," he said slowly. "I never use my ration anyhow."

Harvey drew in his breath. Was the man hinting at something? Because if he was Harvey had money. He raised his head. For the first time he looked carefully at Munro, the man whose ration was still unopened at the end of the month.

He saw a tall lightly-framed man, dressed in the pale gray belted tunic and non-matching breeks that were almost the uniform of the middle-level executive. Munro had a lean, tight face with frown lines between the eyes. Frown lines meant nothing, of course. Many people frowned even while they smiled.

But it was a face with more—what was the word? Character—difference?—than Harvey was accustomed to see in the faces around him. Perhaps the distinctive quality of the face lay in the eyes, which were exceedingly sharp though friendly. They were certainly not the eyes of a man who could be bribed.

Harvey said, "I don't see how you can get along without euphs." He hesitated, thinking of the reason, the real imperative reason,

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why one had to have them, then went on, "For one thing, without them it's so difficult to be pleasant all the time."

Munro smiled. "Yes," he said slowly, "it certainly is. Look here though, why don't you eat your lunch? Some of it anyway. You're looking faint and a little sick. Food might be just the thing. Try the vegetable juice." He pushed the glass toward the younger man.

Harvey picked it up obediently and set it to his lips. It didn't taste bad and after the first sip he realized that he was still hungry in spite of the shock he had had. He broke a muffin in half and began to chew. Its taste was not unpleasant. But the thought of the bland creamy chicken revolted him.

Munro's theo had come. He was drinking it in little gulps, looking at Harvey slantingly from time to time. He was an odd person, certainly, but now that Harvey had somewhat gotten over his pain at losing the euphoria pills he found Munro's company comforting.

Harvey pushed the empty vegetable juice glass aside. "Look here," he began and then stopped. The words stuck in his throat. He couldn't bring himself to ask Munro to *give* him some of his pills. You don't ask a man with a million dollars in his wallet to give you a couple of thousand, even if he takes his wealth casually.

"Look here," Harvey repeated and gulped. Munro was looking at him. He had to finish the sentence somehow. "Why do you think the euph pills are so strictly rationed?" he said. "Even if you don't use your ration yourself you know that most people would be glad to have more."

He waited for the answer in a prickle of discomfort. He didn't know why he had asked anyway, unless he had been hinting. It wasn't likely that Munro would have any answer. Harvey should have said something else. He ought to stop asking questions so much.

"Oh . . ." Munro turned his cup around in its saucer reflectively. "Did you know they were having hearings in Washington right now about increasing the ration? Fact. I've heard some inside stuff."

Harvey relaxed. Like everybody else, he supposed, he got a particular pleasure out of hearing the real dope, the straight goods, the inside stuff. And Munro had the air of one who knew what he was talking about.

"No, I didn't," he replied. "That's very interesting."

"Yes. I have a friend—let's call him Frank—who's in the pharmaceutics division of the Department of Public Health. It seems there's been so much pressure from the pharmaceutical lobby to increase the ration that they finally decided to have hear-

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ings held. They're not public hearings, of course."

"No, naturally." Most things weren't public any more. "I don't suppose there's much doubt about how the hearings will go."

"You wouldn't think so. In the last quarter century pharmaceutical manufacture has become just about the biggest kind of big business there is. People don't realize it yet but the pharm lobby is the most powerful in Washington. What people like and want—they generally get. You know how it is.

"On the other hand, Frank says there's a surprisingly large amount of opposition. So the pharms may not have it all their own way."

Harvey licked his lips. "From whom?" he asked. "Who's opposing it?"

"Well, a few doctors and psychologists. Older people, I guess, though Frank didn't say. But most of the opposition is coming from the Business Planning division of the Department of Commerce.

"You see, euph pills are quite expensive to make—expensive of man-hours and productive facilities. If they increased the ration it would mean building a whole bunch of new factories and reallocating raw materials. The business planning people object that the economy of the country couldn't stand it. The only way it could be done would be by cutting the invader menace production drastically."

"I haven't heard much about the invader menace lately," Harvey said. "I had the impression the danger had died down."

Munro shrugged. "Nobody has heard much about it. Maybe the menace really is less—a man I know in Defense says there haven't been any new evidences. On the other hand the government may just be keeping it dark. You never can tell."

"Yes. So there isn't too good a chance of getting more euph pills."

"It looks that way. Of course it isn't settled yet. But, Mr.—I didn't get your name . . ."

"Harvey."

"But Mr. Harvey, are you sure it's really euphoria pills you want?"

Harvey looked at him in amazement. "Of course it is. What else is it anyway?"

"Why, you want the way the pills make you feel. You want to be able to be pleasant to people, you want to be relaxed and without disagreeable tension, you want to feel that life's worthwhile. More than anything else, you want not to be in danger from the Rages. If you could get those things without taking euph tablets, you'd be satisfied, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so. But it's such an unusual idea. How could it be possible?"

Munro leaned back. As his

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weight shifted the slot in the table opened and the menu plate popped out. Rather absently he punched with the stylus for another cup of theo. "I know a girl . . ." he said with seeming irrelevancy.

Harvey stiffened. He had heard of women—*dirty* women—to whom some men resorted. But he wouldn't debase the relationship between him and Mara, their beautiful relationship, by thinking of such a thing.

Munro was looking at him with a touch of amusement. "I know what's in your mind," he observed, "but you're wrong. Jane works for a living like anybody else—she's a draftsman in an engineering office—and the big incidents in calling on her are having her give you theo and cake and listening to her play her guitar—a guitar's an old-fashioned musical instrument. But a lot of people do call on her. I'm afraid there's rather a cult of Jane."

An explanation occured to Harvey. "Is she very beautiful?" he asked.

"Jane? No, not at all. Though she's not really bad looking. But the thing about Jane is—well, there's something very special about Jane.

"For one thing she gets cross sometimes. I don't mean Rages, I mean a little snappish and cross. It's nice because she doesn't try to argue herself out of it and conceal it the way most people do. And when she's pleasant it really means something. It's genuine. She's pleasant all the way down.

"It's restful to be with her. You can tell her you don't like somebody and she won't scold you or tell you that the person in question is really wonderful, and that it's all your fault. Sometimes she'll say she doesn't like somebody herself. And she doesn't smile all the time. You don't know how tired you get of people always smiling until you're with her. I'd like you to meet her. I think you'd find her interesting. And I think she'd like you."

Harvey opened his mouth to say, "No, thank you," politely. He had no intention of telling Munro so, of course, but he thought that Jane sounded about as unpleasing as it was possible for a girl to be. Such neglect of the feelings of others was anti-social, offensive. And about Munro himself there hung such an aura of the ambiguous—(What was he up to? Why was he doing this?)—that Harvey would have refused to make the visit he suggested for that reason alone.

Munro's theo came through the slot. As the older man reached forward for the cup, Harvey saw the outline of the euph pill bottle in the pocket of his tunic. Quite without reflection he said, "Yes, I think I'd enjoy meeting her."

What he had said surprised him. It did not appear to surprise

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Munro. "Good," he answered. "How about tonight? It's one of the nights she keeps open house. Here's her address."

He wrote on a slip of paper and passed it across the table to Harvey. "Will you be there?" Harvey asked as he accepted it.

"Um-hum. How about us meeting on the corner of Park and Evans about eight? We could go on to her place from there."

Once more Harvey thought of refusing and once more the thought of the bottle of euphoria tablets prevented him. "All right," he said.

"Good. I've got to go now. But I'll see you tonight."

IV

It was one-thirty. The afternoon stretched out before Harvey like a high barren plateau. He couldn't go back to the office, he was too upset. And besides, James had given him the whole day off. He would be none too pleased if Harvey showed up now.

But what was he to do? He stood hesitating on the rubberoid outside the food shop. A man—the same man?—with a Nem went by. Harvey averted his eyes and tried to go on thinking. He might go back to the apartment and rest but Mara wasn't there and the idea of resting alone wasn't attractive. He might go to an entertainment. Or. . . .

What about calling on somebody? Who? Most of the people he liked would be at work at this hour. But after the ambiguity he had sensed in Munro he felt a thirst for the society of someone stable and reliable. Wasn't there . . . ?

Yes, and it would be just the thing. A couple of months or so ago he and Mara had met a Dr. Burgess at a party. Burgess, a pleasant man in middle middle-age, had spoken of having known Harvey's father and had seemed to like Harvey himself. He wasn't, he had said, in practice any longer —Harvey had sensed a reticence, an embarrassment, there—but he would be delighted to have Harvey and his wife call on him at any time.

Harvey himself had felt a rather tepid liking for Burgess, tinged with disapproval for the way in which the man was letting himself go physically. One expected a physician, above all people, to keep himself in good shape.

But today Burgess' bulk seemed to offer reassuring solidity. Burgess himself had seemed really friendly. Besides—Harvey felt a touch of disgust at the way the will o' the wisp still beckoned—besides, a physician, even one who was no longer in practice, might possibly have some . . . pills.

He went to a callbox. After a moment the voice of the robot response said, "Dr. Burgess is out and will return at two-fifteen. Dr. Burgess is out and will return at two-fifteen. Dr. Bur—"

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It wasn't long to wait. Harvey looked around for a way to pass the time before calling again. There was a vid-box on the corner. Harvey walked over to it and dropped a coin in the slot. It was almost time for the two o'clock news.

The screen began to glow. The announcer, brilliant in a photogenic aquamarine chamiss, smiled ingratiatingly. He began to talk.

News these days, except for the perennial floods in the Mississippi Valley, was mostly personal and domestic. And besides, none of the real stuff, the inside facts, would ever be presented over the air.

Harvey listened in curiously until the announcer, with a sudden grimace, said, *"Flash!* The Department of Defense has just reported new evidences of invader activity. Erosion of three of the gigantic new air-pipe installations near Wichita has been confirmed. Informed sources state that the Administration is drafting an emergency bill to be presented to Congress within the next few days."

The announcer smiled and cleared his throat. "Well, folks, we can be sure that our government won't take this new provocation lying down. Yessir, if the invaders think they avoid us by hiding out in a new dimension they'll find out they have another think coming. We may not like to fight, but . . ." His grin grew fierce. "And now, in exactly ten seconds, it will be fifteen minutes after two."

Harvey switched him off. He didn't want to hear about the invaders, though he didn't doubt the menace was real enough. He went back to the call-box.

Burgess was in, would be glad to see him. Harvey broke the call, feeling a twitch of some minor emotion because the doctor looked so tired. He plugged for a copt at the corner near the vid-box and when it came fed it the coordinates of Burgess' address.

During the short ride he sat with his hands pressed over his eyes. Perhaps he should have gone to the apartment to rest after all. But he hated the place when Mara wasn't there. He was sure he'd enjoy talking to Burgess.

The copt hovered and landed on signal. Rather to Harvey's surprise the address proved to be the second floor of a produce warehouse in the wholesale market district. A pedal staircase led up to it.

Harvey walked up, wondering. He had expected a separate domicile out in the Greenways, if anything. Activity in the wholesale district began long before the solar installations were turned on. Burgess must keep odd hours.

Burgess met him at the head of the stair. He looked more tired and careworn than he had in the viewer. "Hello," he said. "I'm glad to see you." He hesitated.

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"I should have told you when you called but I've been rather busy. The fact is I received notification this morning that a Nem would be attached to me for a few days. I don't know what's delaying the thing. I've been expecting it for hours. I'd be glad to have you stay but—do you want to associate with a man who's been listed for re-education with the department of Mental Health? I mean, some people are shy about it." He smiled.

Harvey's impulse was to excuse himself politely and get out. As Burgess had remarked, people stayed away from a man who had a Nem. It wasn't exactly guilt by association, but—one didn't want to be conspicuous and queer.

"Well, I—" He swallowed. Burgess looked not only tired but lonely and depressed. Perhaps he wasn't all he should have been but Harvey in this moment was conscious of the lacks and faults in himself. "Oh, I don't mind," he said. "Lots of people have Nems."

"Good! Come on in." Burgess opened the door of his apartment. Harvey stepped into a long low room, illuminated from a series of skylights. There was almost no furniture. Around the walls were cages of animals.

"I've been getting rid of a lot of things," Burgess said. "Nems go away much sooner if they don't find anything out of the ordinary in the places they're attached to. The trouble is that I've got only a small reducer and everything has to be torn into small pieces before I can dispose of it. I don't want to blow a fuse in the reducer. I was putting the experimental animals out of the way with nembutal when you came."

"What will you do with them?" Harvey asked. "I should think a Nem would be just as suspicious of a lot of dead experimental animals as it would of live ones." He was conscious as he spoke that his voice was not quite normal. He hoped Burgess wouldn't notice. He couldn't help being a little nervous at Burgess' calm avowal of activities which, if not quite forbidden, were certainly unusual.

"Oh, I'll put them in the reducer one at a time. They're small subjects, you see, white rats and guinea-pigs. Do you mind if I get on with the euthanasia? I've got about ten rats to go."

"Certainly not. Unh—could I help?"

Burgess rubbed his nose. "That's nice of you. Yes, you can. Do you see that stack of papers on the floor? Experimental notes. Crumble them up one at a time and put them in the reducer. Tear the heavy cardboard binders into four."

"All right." Harvey began crumpling and disposing obediently. After a moment he asked. "What were the experiments

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about? I mean, if you don't mind telling me."

"Not at all. It's a little hard to synopsize though. I was trying quite a lot of things. One of the most interesting was the long-time effect of euph pills."

Harvey gave an uncontrollable shiver. Burgess wasn't looking at him. "Well, go on," he said.

"My results have been indefinite. One of the things that annoys me about the Nem visitation is breaking off the tests just when I had them well under way."

He turned around from the cages, a syringe in one hand, and looked at Harvey. "I wonder . . . it's rather a lot to ask of a guest, I know. But then you didn't impress me as being too conventional."

Harvey felt himself flushing with annoyance. "Well?" he said.

"Would you mind climbing up through the skylight and putting this cage on the roof? I can put food and water in it for three or four days and the Nems are not so intelligent that one of them would think of looking in such an unlikely place for evidence. They're rather low-quality robots, really."

"You mean you want me to put the cage up there with the animals so you can pick up the experiment after the Nem has gone?"

"That's about it. I'm too old and out of condition to do it myself."

Harvey opened his mouth to refuse indignantly, but Burgess was looking at him, smiling faintly, as if he anticipated such an answer only too well. "I'll be glad to," he said.

"That's really very nice of you." Burgess sounded pleased. "Here's a chair," he went on. "You open the skylight with this pole. Draw yourself up over the edge. Be careful not to break the glass. That might make the Nem suspicious. I'll hand the cage up to you after you're outside."

Harvey had been obeying the instructions as Burgess gave them. He stood on the chair, caught hold of the frame of the skylight and hoisted. He drew himself up over the edge of the opening with some difficulty. Burgess, below, was standing on the chair on tiptoe, holding the cage out to him.

Harvey leaned down and caught the wires of the cage with his fingertips. For a moment he thought he was going to drop it. It was a good thing he had such long arms.

The rats in the cage were giving a faint frightened squeaking. Harvey thought, "If the Nem came in now . . ." But there was no knock at the door. He shifted his weight and crawled out on the roof, the cage in one hand.

He stood up. The roof was quite flat, yielding a little under his feet. From the slight elevation he could see the roofs of other warehouses and, a long way off, the atmospheric haze and taller buildings that marked the con-

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centration of population of the city.

He had expected something—a wide view, cleaner air, a freer prospect. But there wasn't much to see really. It was disappointing.

V

Harvey sighed. He looked about for a suitable place to put the cage. He decided on the shadow of one of the ventilators. The water in the rats' dish had been spilled while he was getting up with the cage. He called the information down to Burgess, and the older man handed him up a flask. Then he clambered down.

"I expect the rats will be all right," he said when he was once more within the long room. "You know, you never did tell me about your experiments with the euphoria pills."

"Oh. Well, the rats I gave the pills to at first behaved about as one would suppose. They fought less than those in the control cages and they ate more. There seemed to be a little less mating activity among them but it wasn't significant.

"But after they'd had the pills for quite a while, eight months or so, an interesting thing happened. I'd been going to feed them—I had the cage open and the food pan out—when I dropped the box of food pellets. The stuff bounced all over the floor. I swept it up. When I got back to the cage with more food the rats were whirling around in circles. Like dancing mice.

"I didn't know what had happened. I tried the same thing with the control cage, and while the rats in it got excited and squeaked and bit each other when they had to wait to be fed, they didn't whirl about. I tried all sorts of combinations and in the end I decided that whenever the euph-fed rats were subjected to a frustration they displayed the whirling phenomena. I dissected one of them but I couldn't find any structural changes. Now I'm wishing I'd started out with more rats."

"What do you think causes it?" Harvey asked. He had returned to his job of destroying papers in the reducer.

"The whirling? I only wish I were a better biologist—my training was primarily medical. I suppose there *are* changes in the rats which are too subtle for me to detect."

"But everybody says that euphoria pills are perfectly harmless!"

"I know—I didn't say they weren't. I just said that rats that fed on them tended to whirl about." Burgess came over to the reducer and began putting in the bodies of the lab animals one at a time. The reducer flared up and gave a deeper humming as each was consumed.

"Then you wouldn't be in favor of increasing the ration of euphoria pills?"

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"Increasing it? I didn't know the question had come up."

"It has." Harvey related the conversation he had had with Munro. At its end Burgess whistled.

"Well, if all that's keeping them from increasing the ration is the invader menace I imagine it'll be increased," he said.

"What do you mean by that? I heard there had been new evidences when I was listening to the vid just before I came here."

"Evidences? It's my opinion that the invader menace has been greatly exaggerated if it exists at all. Did you ever see an invader? Did you ever know anyone who had? Did you ever even see a picture of any damage an invader had done? And yet we've been hearing about the invader menace for some fifteen years."

"You mean somebody's lying?"

"Or is deceiving himself."

"I certainly hope you're right." Harvey brought one of the empty cages over to the reducer and began breaking it up preparatory to consuming it. "It would be—splendid—if the ration were increased."

"You'd like the ration increased, wouldn't you?" Burgess commented. "Do you mind telling me why?"

"Oh—well. . . ." Suddenly, it was all coming out. His fears, his difficulty in getting along with people, his search for extra pills. He tried to stop himself from talking and couldn't. A part of him listened, appalled, while the rest of him found wild relief in the outpouring. "That's why I'd like more pills," he finished. "Because I'm afraid I'll have—I'll have a *final* Rage."

"Um—yes. How about us having a little tea—I mean theo? You look pretty tired to me. From what you say you've had a hard day. There are cups in the cupboard there and I've got a funny, old-fashioned kind of bread—salt-rising—that's mighty good just with butter. You get the cups."

Harvey obeyed. Burgess washed his hands at the sink at the end of the room and filled a pot with water for theo. When Harvey came back with the cups he was cutting slices from a crumby pale-cream loaf. "This sort of bread takes lots of butter," he said. He began spreading it on.

When the theo boiled he filled Harvey's cup and then his own. He drew up chairs and got silverware. They sat down at the narrow table.

Harvey sipped his theo with gratitude. Burgess had been right, it was just what he needed. But when he took one of the slices of odd-looking bread from the plate the doctor offered him he had to put it down untasted. It had a peculiar, highly offensive smell. He didn't see how Burgess could eat it. He had never smelled

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anything like it before. It sickened him.

Burgess was watching him. "What's the matter, don't you like the bread?"

"It—has such a peculiar smell."

Burgess chuckled. "I know. Alice says that when she makes it she has to keep all the ventilators closed and the air purifiers working full strength so the neighbors won't complain. But salt-rising bread's supposed to smell that way. Look here, how about your eating that slice just to please me? You might change your mind."

Harvey raised the bread to his lips. With a definite effort of will he bit, chewed, swallowed. He took another bite.

It was less odious. By the time he had come to the end of the slice the smell seemed, if not exactly pleasant, not nearly so offensive. He said as much to Burgess.

"Yes, you get fond of it," the doctor answered. "Alice—my niece—makes it just for me. It does have an odd smell, but as I said before, it's *supposed* to smell like that. That's part of the charm. Have another slice."

They ate in companionable silence. At last Burgess pushed the cups back and lit his pipe. "Wonder why my Nem—short for Nemises. I understand the man who invented the thing was a student of the classics—is delayed. Oh, well, I don't know why I should be in any hurry to start listening to the thing's repertoire of recorded admonition and advice. I've had one attached to me before. It's the later days that get you. The longer it goes on the worse it is.

"You were talking about your fear of a final Rage. Such fears are not uncommon, you know. May I ask you a rather personal question?"

Harvey shrugged. "If you like. I don't have to answer it."

"That's right, I can't make you. I met your wife at the party, you know—a beautiful girl. How long is it since you had intercourse with her?"

"I—it's none of your business. None at all."

"I asked as a physician. *And* as a friend." Then, when Harvey still did not answer, he went on with a keen glance, "Six months? A year? Two years? More than that?"

Harvey moved in his seat. He said, as if in self-defense, "Oh, I know how beautiful it is. I know it's a wonderful experience. But somehow . . ."

"But somehow it isn't any fun?" Burgess laughed gently. "You'd be surprised to know how many people say that. Well, it's not for me to alter the ideology of a whole culture. But I'd like to suggest that beauty, in that connection, may be more than irrelevent—it may be actually deleterious.

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"One of the great aims our culture has set itself has been that of changing or repressing certain basic psychological, physiological and anatomical facts to make them more aesthetically presentable. On the whole it has succeeded in that aim. But the end result is that a very large number of people—I'd guess about half the population—has come to feel, as you do, that while physical love is very beautiful it isn't much fun.

"Part of the reason for your dependence on euphoria pills is obvious: the cachexia caused by a long period of abstinence. Your wife is a beautiful girl. It is possible that her beauty is one of the things that is bothering you."

He began to pick up cups and carry them over to the sink. Harvey, still seated, felt the angry blood rush to his face. He opened his mouth to reply. There was a sudden sharp rap at the door. A mechanical voice, not loud but extremely penetrating, began to speak.

"I am a mental-attitude-correcting device from the department of Mental Health," it said. "I have been sent to attach myself to Dr. Henry Burgess for a period not to exceed one week or until his mental orientation shows significant change. I derive my authority from S. five hundred fifty-six, amendment three. Please let me in."

Burgess' heavy face wore an exhausted look. "Well, it's come," he said to Harvey. "I suppose you'll be wanting to go now."

Harvey hesitated. He felt that he ought to offer to stay, that Burgess would like him to offer to. But his resentment at the doctor's questions, his deep sense of affront at the comments Burgess had made, were too strong for him. "Yes, I think I might as well go," he replied.

"All right. You can get out the back way." He led Harvey through a door at the rear of the room and pointed out a stair. "Down the steps and at the bottom turn to your right. Good-by."

"Good-by." Harvey started down. Halfway down the flight he turned and looked back. Burgess' eyes were still fixed on him but he did not seem to see him. There was a look of weary endurance on his face.

For a moment Harvey almost went back to him. Then he shrugged mentally. It was over, there was nothing he could do. Burgess would have to get through his ordeal by himself. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't his affair.

So comforted he went on down the flight of steps. At the bottom he turned right. Above him he could hear a faint mechanical murmur. It must be the Nem.

The time was almost six o'clock. Harvey wanted to go home to Mara. But he had promised Munro. And the turquoise blue will o' the wisp still

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drew him. He stopped at a call-box in the middle of the next block and ordered Mara sent some flowers. He verigraphed an affectionate message to go with them.

VI

"I forgot my inro," Harvey said. "I came back for it."

Jane did not seem to have moved from where she had been standing when he and Munro and the others had left her. She was still standing with her head a little bent, one hand resting against a table, the other holding her guitar. But then it had been only a little time since he had said good night.

Why had he come back? Not for the inro—he had another at home and none of the tablets it contained were valuable. For Jane? But he didn't like—he didn't care—for *her*.

He hadn't thought he would like her and when Munro had introduced him to her his belief had been confirmed. She was darker than Mara, not so tall, with a slighter, lighter body. One met dozens of beautiful women daily and Jane's good looks were barely passable. The only thing Harvey had liked about her when he had met her were her hands.

She had got chairs for him and Munro and the other two men—Harvey hadn't been sure of their names. She had brought them theo and cake, neither as sweet as Harvey was used to. Then she had sat down on the floor and, after a few sad, thrumming chords on her guitar, had begun to sing for them.

Her voice was low and melancholy and the song, too, was sad. Harvey had listened with disapproval. He thought sad songs bad mental hygiene. But the song's recurrent burden—*Some days I hate the world*—had caught his attention and he had been fascinated by the singer's sincerity.

She *was* sincere; she put into words the things other people hid, even from themselves. Her singing seemed to be easing some tension in him of which he had been only dimly conscious. And almost as much as he had liked the singing he had enjoyed watching the play of expression over her mobile face.

What was it Munro had said—that you got tired of people always smiling? Now Harvey knew what he had meant. Jane's face as she sang had been sad, despairing, resentful, resigned. Not pretty emotions. But what a relief it had been to see them made visible! And when she had finished the song, with a final wild strumming, he, like the others, had begun to clap.

So far it had been well enough. He had listened to a girl singing and had enjoyed it. That would not have been enough to bring him back to Jane's apartment after the others had gone, hunt-

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ing an inro which, he half-suspected, he had lost on purpose in the first place.

But when she had finished singing Jane had half-risen to her knees. She had reached forward to put the guitar on a low table. Harvey had seen a drop of sweat glistening in the curve of her armpit.

He had never seen such a thing before. He had looked at it with fascinated disgust. And at the same time he had felt a stab of desire sweeter and more urgent than anything he had ever known.

He had thought, "In love, her body would be covered with a silken shimmer of sweat. Wherever my fingers touched her, they would meet a moist, subtle veil."

He had been ashamed of himself, he had tried to think of Mara. And Mara had seemed remote and unreal, grotesque to remember, a mistake.

He didn't want his inro, he hadn't come back for that. He didn't like Jane, or care for her? Perhaps not. But he knew he had come back for Jane.

"I forgot my inro," he replied. "May I look for it?"

"Of course. I thought you might forget something." Her smile robbed the words of the offense he might otherwise have found in them. "It's probably in your chair."

He didn't know what she meant, but he followed her and watched as she turned the inflated cushions upside down, hunting the missing case. She straightened after a minute and handed the inro to him. Her hand, faintly moist, brushed his. This time there could be no delaying. He caught her in his arms and began kissing her.

For a moment—it seemed too good to be true—she responded. From her body, relaxed and willing under the golden tunic, a perfume, an exhalation, the very bouquet of womanhood, rose to him. He felt wild gratitude for the perception. This was another thing he had been wanting all his life.

His body began to believe in its happiness. What Jane could give would be sweeter, better, than anything a euph pill . . . This was what Munro must have meant. Rest and pleasure and at the end sweet sleep.

He pulled her tunic loose at the bottom and ran his hands under it. Jane shivered. Slowly, sadly, she drew away from him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't."

"What's the matter? Why not?" He found to his chagrin that in another minute he would be crying. He must control himself. "Why not?" he asked once more.

"Don't be so unhappy," she said helplessly.

"Jane—Jane! I've had such a bad time. Won't you please—be good to me!"

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She walked over to the table and picked up her guitar. She struck a low resonant chord. "I'm sorry for you," she said without turning. "As far as that goes I'm sorry for a lot of men. But pity isn't a very good motive for love-making."

"You responded!" His voice held accusation and reproach.

"I know. You took me by surprise. But you see I already have a man."

"Munro?" he asked, instantly jealous.

She laughed. "No, not Munro. Munro's just one of the men who likes to listen to me sing. My—friend works for the government. You would know his name if I told you. He's in Washington now, testifying.

"We have to be careful. I'm considered a rather anti-social person, you know. Once I had a Nem. It's hard for us to meet. I miss him. That's why I let you . . . I am very fond of him."

Harvey had hardly listened to Jane's last words. He thought, *From the way she is standing she still wants to. And I'm bigger and stronger than she is. I must outweigh her by fifty pounds. Over against the wall under the glow strip there's a couch.*

He caught her wrists in his hands, and forced them behind her back. For the first time in his life he felt a fierce pride in his aggressiveness and masculinity. And she'd thank him afterwards, she'd be grateful. He began to drag her toward the bed.

She was breathing deeply, but she did not resist. Neither did she cooperate. After a moment she said in a perfectly calm voice, "You're married, aren't you? Are you in love with your wife?"

He was so surprised that he dropped her hands. Whatever he had been expecting, it had not been this. Now that it was too late, he saw that he should have been even more resolute. He was strong enough to have dragged her to the couch with one hand.

The mood of triumphant desire was ebbing away from him. For a moment he felt a murderous hatred toward the girl. Then that too vanished. He felt exhausted. He walked over to one of the armchairs, and sat down in it.

Jane was rubbing her wrists. "I'll have bruises. . . . You didn't tell me, Harvey. Are you married? Are you fond of your wife?"

He didn't know why he should bother to answer. And yet her question sounded like more than mere persecution. He said, "Yes. I suppose I am."

She had once more picked up her guitar. Very softly she struck a chord on it. "Is she fond of you?"

"Mara? I suppose so."

"Um. And is she happy? Living, I mean, the way I think you must live."

"I—why, I don't know." De-

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spite himself, he was getting interested. "I never thought much about it. Why shouldn't she be?"

Jane laughed. She played a bar or two of something that sounded like a rapid dance. "Perhaps she doesn't like married life any better than you do. Perhaps—since she's after all a woman—she doesn't enjoy being a robot wife. She may be a little tired of being a beautiful doll with a chromium-plated interior."

"But—what are you suggesting? Mara's beautiful. But what are you getting at?"

"That a woman may not be happy even though she's beautiful. Ask her to stop taking her pills."

"You want her to be like you?" Harvey asked incredulously.

"I don't *want* her to be anything. But you and she might both be happier."

"I—I can't—*what* pills?"

"All of them. You too, both of you. Stop taking your pills. Be real."

". . . Even her *cycle* pills?"

"Yes."

He stared at her for a moment, unable to believe his ears. What she had just said seemed to him so horrible, so repulsive, that her standing quietly with her guitar in one hand made him doubt whether the word had actually been said.

She raised her head slightly, and looked at him. "Yes," she repeated. "Even those."

He caught at his collar. It seemed to him that he was choking. "You—you're foul!" he gasped. "How can you, a woman, even suggest such a thing?"

She did not recant. He knew that if he stayed he would begin to scream. He bit his lip savagely. Then he turned, and ran out of the room.

Outside on the rubberoid he paused, almost sobbing. From the room he had just quitted there came the soft murmur of music, and then a passionate clamor of deep-throbbing chords. Jane and her guitar. It was as if she hurled a cloud of silver arrows after him.

VII

He couldn't get to sleep. Weariness had driven him home at last, after hours of walking through the streets. Now he lay in bed beside Mara, listening to her relaxed breathing, and the tension and conflict in him were no less than they had been when he had paced the streets outside.

What was he to do? What was it that he wanted? In his hours of walking he had thought that it was his confusion and uncertainty that was the heart of his conflict. Once a robot policeman had stopped him and demanded to see his identials. Harvey had been almost glad, thinking, *If it takes me into custody, I'll have a real problem. I'll be in trouble. There'll be something concrete that I can act on.*

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But the mechanism had dismissed him with caution. Being out so late, alone, was anti-social and offensive. Harvey had walked on. Though the last solar installation had been turned off hours ago, the dome was not quite dark. There must be a moon in the world outside.

More walking. His legs hurt. Always that agitated weariness, and the questions. What did he want? What could he want? What was he hunting for himself?

It was no longer Jane herself, he had thought, no longer her unique person, the sweet and hateful body he had wanted to enjoy. But Jane's last words had presented him with what he felt to be a hideous temptation. He could go on resisting it, he knew. He was strong enough. But did he want to resist?

He had turned home at last, too tired to go on walking even though nothing was solved. He had entered the apartment and found Mara, in the faint golden light of the glowstrip, quietly sleeping. The flowers he had sent her had been carefully arranged in a low vase on the table beside the bed.

He had undressed, taken two sleeping tablets, lain down beside her. And now he couldn't sleep.

The conflict concerned more than Jane. His whole day, from the morning that now seemed so remote to the present moment in bed with Mara beside him, had confronted him with evidence that disturbed him deeply.

Killinan, who had had plenty of euph pills, and was now in a Hostel. Munro, who didn't use his ration and who asked disturbing questions. Burgess and his experimental rats. Burgess especially. And Jane. What *could* he believe?

Wasn't it possible that a whole society was deliberately poisoning itself?

He rolled over, punching at his pillow. Mara stirred, but did not waken. He went on with the squirrel cage of his thoughts.

Was he deliberately *being* poisoned? No, not quite that. It would have meant that the big pharms knew that the euphoria pills were dangerous, and manufactured them anyway. But a whole society was deliberately closing its eyes to evidences of poisoning. A society that was so eager to forget the sordid physical bases of its existence that it struck out blindly at nothing—the invaders—like a man in Rage. And in the end it acquiesced, like a man taking euphoria pills, in its own suicide.

He might be wrong. He hoped he was wrong. Next week he'd go and talk to Burgess about it.

Time passed. His eyes hurt. It was nearly four. He wanted to stop thinking and go to sleep.

Another sleeping tablet? He'd already had the permitted dosage, and besides, another wouldn't

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help. They never did. They only made his ears ring. He wanted real, refreshing sleep.

A . . . a euphoria pill . . . Yes. Blue-green little temptresses, enticing him to something worse than that from which they gave relief? It might be. He wasn't sure. But it didn't matter. He needed sleep too badly to care.

Suddenly he knew the answer. Mara's inro case. She was always careful with her ration. She'd have a euph or two left that she could spare.

He got out of bed very softly, and went over to her dresser. Her case was lying on it. He opened it. She only had three pills.

He shook one out into his hand. What he was doing was wrong, illegal. But Mara was his wife, wasn't she? She ought to help.

He'd swallow the euph dry. He raised the pill to his lips. He had a sudden stabbing recollection of Killinan's face. It had moved, and jerked, and twitched like glass in a kaleidoscope. Each piece of it had been autonomous. Killinan had talked about the red dogs. He had hid under the table and wept.

It might not have been the pills, of course. Even Burgess hadn't said they had anything to do with the Rages. But . . . Harvey dropped the pill back in the inro case.

As if the tiny noise had disturbed her, Mara turned in the bed. She moved her long legs restlessly. In the soft light of the glowstrip her body was clearly visible. Objectively and dispassionately Harvey looked down at her.

Beautiful. How could he doubt that? In a world where one met lovely women daily, Harvey had never seen one more beautiful. Her body was flawless, her skin fine-grained and lustrous. She was as perfect as a statue. But a woman sculptured out of stone or clay does not inspire desire. A man does not want a stone woman in his bed.

Still he looked at her. She was perfect. And her perfection aroused his hate.

He wanted to hit her, hurt her, mar her in some way. To bend her to his will, mark her skin with bruises. And then she could be had, enjoyed.

This was not what he could have had with Jane, but it would be something. There would be a relaxing of tension. She was his wife, he could have her. Then he could sleep.

Once more Mara stirred. She smiled, as if she knew he was looking at her. She murmured something. No, it wouldn't do.

Mara would be frightened if he awakened her with rough caresses. But she would smile. She would keep on smiling. She would try to make it seem beautiful. She would smile until desire died in

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him. It wouldn't do. Not at all.

What would happen, anyway, if he broke her skin with his teeth? Would blood come out, or would it be some colorless liquid? Or something sweet-scented, like cologne? She was *so* perfect! Surely she would bleed cologne.

He put his hands down and once more looked at Mara. Could he, after all, do nothing? He had told Jane he was fond of Mara. It was true. Yet he knew that he had never thought much about Mara's happiness. He has assumed that she must like the way they were living. It had seemed to be the way one was supposed to live.

But Jane had said that she mightn't be happy. Jane had said she was a woman, that she might not like being a beautiful doll, a robot wife. If that was so—

There flashed into Harvey's mind, unbidden, a recollection from the early days of his marriage. It had been after one of their infrequent erotic passages.

He had smiled at her and said, "Thank you, dear, for a beautiful experience!" He had smiled and Mara had smiled back, and answered something suitable. But in the instant before she had replied, her eyes had sent a message quite different from her smile.

Her look had puzzled him. He had filed it away in his memory. It had been forgotten until now. Now he got it out and examined it, and knew it for what it was. Mara had smiled at him, yes. But in the instant before she had smiled, she had given him a look of pure hate.

Yes—now he understood. Now he knew what to do.

He got Mara's inro from her dresser. He went into her bathroom and gathered up all her pills. There were six or seven bottles of them. Then he went into his own bath.

He began to open bottles and shake their contents into the toilet bowl. He hadn't realized he and Mara were taking so many things.

When the bottles were all empty, he pressed the button. There was a faint pinging as the pillules disintegrated. Then they slid down the drain.

It was over.

At last he had acted. Now he could sleep.

He went into the bedroom and lay down beside Mara. Would she be angry at him tomorrow? No, not angry, but perhaps frightened. He thought he could get her over it. He would try.

Sleep began to creep up around him, like a tide rising around a stranded boat. To what shore would it wash him? What would life be like tomorrow? Would he wake up at all? He would have to trust himself and Mara. There was nothing else he could do.

He put his arm around his wife and drew her to him. He slept.

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battleground

by . . . Lester del Rey

We know that the human race must struggle to survive—and that on the outcome may hang disaster. But just how wide is Armageddon?

BEYOND THE observation port of the hypercruiser *Clarion* lay the utter blackness of nothing. The ship was effectively cutting across space without going through it, spanning parsecs for every subjective day of travel.

There were neither stars, space nor time around them, and only the great detectors built into the ship could keep them from being hopelessly lost. These followed a trail of energy laid down on the way out from Earth years before, leading them homeward, solar system by solar system.

Acting Captain Lenk stood with his back to the other three, studying their sullen reflections in the port. It was better than facing them directly, somehow, even though it showed his own bald scalp, tautly hollow face and slump-shouldered body.

"All right," he said at last. "So we vote again. I'll have to remind you we're under orders to investigate all habitable planets on a line back to Earth. I vote we follow orders. Jeremy?"

The xenologist shrugged faintly. His ash-blond coloring, general slimness and refinement of

Lester del Rey would certainly be acclaimed by any unbiased critic as one of America's ten most gifted science fiction writers. His work has appeared in many magazines, and Hollywood, radio, and TV have all enhanced his ever-growing popularity. In BATTLEGROUND *he has found a theme worthy of his rare talents—the doom potential in an alien culture.*

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features gave him a look of weakness, but his voice was a heavy, determined bass. "I stand pat. We didn't explore the last planet enough. I vote we go back and make a thorough job of it."

"Home—at once!" The roar came from the squat, black-bearded minerologist, Graves. "God never meant man to leave the world on which He put him! Take us back, I say, where . . ."

"Aimes?" Lenk cut in quickly.

They'd heard Graves' violently fundamentalist arguments endlessly, until the sound of his voice was enough to revive every antagonism and hatred they had ever felt. Graves had been converted to the newest and most rapidly expanding of the extreme evangelical faiths just before they had left. And unfortunately for the others, he had maintained that his covenant to go on the exploration could not be broken, even though venturing into space was a cardinal sin.

Aimes glowered at the others from under grizzled eyebrows. Of them all, the linguodynamicist took part in the fewest arguments and apparently detested the others most. He turned his heavy body now as he studied them, seemingly trying to make up his mind which he detested most at the moment. Then he grunted.

"With you, Captain," Aimes said curtly.

He swung on his heel and stalked out of the control cabin, to go back to studying the undeciphered writing of the planets they had visited.

Graves let out a single hiss and followed, probably heading for the galley, since it was his period to cook.

Jeremy waited deliberately until the minerologist's footsteps could no longer be heard, and then turned to leave.

Lenk hesitated for a second, then decided that monotony was worse than anything else. "How about some chess, Jeremy?" he asked.

The other stopped, and some of the sullenness left his face. Apparently the protracted arguments had wearied him until he was also feeling the relief of decisive action. "Why not?" Jeremy said. "I'll set up the board while you fiddle with your dials."

No fiddling was necessary, since Lenk had never cut them off their automatic detecting circuit, but he went through the motions for the other's benefit. Gravitic strain came faintly through hyperspace, and the ship could locate suns by it. If approach revealed planets of habitable size, it was set to snap out of hyperspace automatically near the most likely world.

Lenk had been afraid such a solar system might be found before they could resolve the argument, and his own relief from the full measure of cabin fever came from the end of that possibility.

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They settled down to the game with a minimum of conversation. Since the other four members of the crew had been killed by some unknown virus, conversation had proven less than cheerful. It was better when they were on a planet and busy, but four people were too few for the monotony of hypertravel.

Then Jeremy snapped out of it. He cleared his throat tentatively while castling, grimaced, and then nodded positively. "I was right, Lenk. We never did explore those other planets properly."

"Maybe not," Lenk agreed. "But with the possibility of alien raiders headed toward Earth . . ."

"Bunk! No sign of raiders. Every indication was that the races on those worlds killed themselves off—no technology alien to their own culture. And there would have been with aliens invading."

"Time that way? Coincidence can account for just so much."

"It has to account for the lowering cultural levels in the colonizing direction," Jeremy said curtly. "Better leave that sort of argument to Aimes. He's conditioned to it."

Lenk shrugged and turned back to the chess. It was over his head, anyhow.

Men had built only three other cruisers capable of exceeding the speed of light, so far. The first had gone out in a direction opposite to that of the *Clarion* and had returned to report a regular decline in culture as the distance of habitable worlds from Earth increased. The nearest was in a medieval state, the next an early bronze culture, then a stone-age one, and so on, down to the furthest explored, where the native race had barely discovered fire.

It had been either impossible coincidence or the evidence of some law nobody has been quite ready to accept, save for the newly spreading fundamentalists, who maintained it proved that Earth was the center of the universe.

The other two cruisers had not reported back when the *Clarion* took off.

And their own trip had only added to the mystery, and they had touched on four habitable systems. And on each, there had been evidence of a highly developed race and some vast struggle that had killed off that race completely.

The furthest had lain fallow for an unguessable period of time, and in each succeeding one, evidence indicated the time interval since the destruction of the culture had been less. On the world they had left, the end must have come not more than a few thousand years before.

"Suppose one race had gone along in a straight line, seeding the systems with life," Lenk guessed. "Remember, every race

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we found had similarities. And suppose another race of conquerors stumbled on that line and is mopping up? Maybe with some weapon that leaves no trace."

Jeremy looked at him. "Suppose Graves is right, and his God wipes out all wicked races. He keeps planting races, hoping they'll turn out right, and wiping out the old ones?" he snorted. "Only, of course he thinks Earth is the only world that counts. We're dealing with facts, Lenk, not wild theories. And why should an alien race simply wipe out another race, wait a thousand years or so, and move on—without using the plant afterwards, even for a base for the next operation? Also, why should we find plenty of weapons, but no skeletons?"

"Skeletons are pretty fragile. And if somebody had the mythical heat ray . . ."

"Bunk! If it would vaporize calcium in the bones, it would vaporize some of the parts of the weapons we found." Jeremy moved a rook, considered it, and pointed. "Check. And there are always some parts of skeletons that will last more than a thousand years. I've got a theory, but it's . . ."

Pale light cut through the viewing port, and a gong sounded in the room. Lenk jerked to his feet and moved to his screens.

"Maybe we'll know now," he said. "We'll be landing on a planet in about an hour. And it looks pretty much like Earth, from here."

He cranked up the gain on the magnifiers, and studied it again, scanning the surface of the planet below them. There were clouds in the sky, but through a clear patch he made out enough evidence.

"Want me to set us down near a city?" he asked, pointing.

Jeremy nodded. Like all the other planets on this trip, the one below was either inhabited or had been inhabited until recently.

They knew before the ship landed that the habitation was strictly past tense, at least as far as any high level of culture was concerned. The cities were in ruins.

At one time, they must have reared upwards to heights as imposing as those of the free state of New York City or the commonwealth of Chicago. But now the buildings had lost their topmost towers, and the bases showed yawning holes in many places.

They landed in the center of the largest city, after a quick skim over the surface to be sure that no smaller city had escaped. A quick sampling of the air indicated it was breathable, with no poisons and only a touch of radioactivity, too low to be dangerous.

Aimes and Jeremy went out, each in a little tractor. While

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making explorations, they were capable of forgetting their antagonisms in their common curiosity.

Graves remained on the ship. He had decided somewhere along the line that setting foot on an alien planet was more sinful than travel through space, and refused to be shaken.

Lenk finished what observations were necessary. He fiddled around, bothered by the quiet city outside. It had been better on the other worlds, where the ruins had been softened by time and weather. Here, it was too easy to imagine things. Finally, he climbed into rough clothes, and went out on foot.

Everything was silent. Grass almost identical with that of Earth was growing through much of the torn pavement, and there were trees and bushes here and there. Vines had climbed some of the ruined walls. But there were no flowers. Much of the planet had apparently been overgrown with forest and weeds, but this city was in a temperate zone, and clear enough for easy travel.

Lenk listened to the wind, and the faint sighing of a few trees nearby. He kicked over stones and rubble where they lay on patches of damp earth. And he kept looking at the sky.

But it was no different from other worlds as far as the desolation went. There were no insects, and no animals stared warily up from the basements, and the grass showed no signs of having been grazed. It was as if the animal kingdom had never existed here.

He made his way back from the section of largest buildings, toward what might have been a park at one time. Here there was less danger of being trapped in any collapsing ruin, and he moved more confidently. The low buildings might have been public sites, but they somehow seemed more like homes.

He stumbled on something, and leaned down to pick it up. At first, the oddness of its design confused his vision. Then he made out a barrel with rifling inside, and a chamber that still contained pellets, now covered with corrosion. It would have fitted his hand oddly, but he could have used the pistol.

Beyond it lay a line of rust that might have been a sword at one time. Coiled over it was a heavy loop of thick plastic that ended in a group of wires, apparently of stainless steel. Each wire ended in a row of cutting points. It might have been a cross between a knout and a bolas. He had a vision of something alien and sinister coming at him with one of those, and shuddered.

There was a ruin of rust and corroded parts further on that might have been a variation of a machine gun. Lenk started for it, to be stopped by a shout.

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"Hold it!" It was Jeremy's voice, and now the tank came around a corner, and headed toward him. "Stay put, Lenk. That thing may be booby-trapped. And we can't be sure here that there has been time enough to make it safe."

Lenk shuddered again, and climbed in hastily as Jeremy held open the door. It was tight inside, but reasonably safe, since the tank had been designed for almost anything. Jeremy must have seen him leaving the ship and followed.

But by noon they had abandoned the fear of booby-traps. Either there had never been any or time had drawn their stings.

Lenk wandered through the section already roughly surveyed, and declared safe. He felt convinced the inhabitants of this world once had been more like men than most other races. They had been two-legged, with arms and heads in a human position on their upright bodies.

Judging from the size of the furniture, they had been slightly larger than men but not enough to matter. The pictures on the walls were odd mostly for the greenish tints of the skin and the absence of outward noses or ears. With a little fixing and recoloring, they might have been *people*.

He came to a room that had been sealed off, pried open the door, and went in. It smelled stale enough to indicate that it had been reasonably air-tight. Benches and chairs ran along one wall, and a heavy wooden table occupied the middle. On that were piled bits and pieces in a curious scramble. He studied them carefully—belts, obviously, buttons, the inevitable weapons, scraps of plastic material.

A minute later, he was shouting for Jeremy over the little walkie-talkie. The xenologist appeared in less than five minutes. He stared about for a second, then grinned wryly.

"Your first, eh? I've found a lot of them. Sure, those were corpses there once." He saw Lenk's expression, and shrugged. "Oh, you were right to call me. It proves we weren't crazy. Wood and some cloth still preserved, but no bones. I've got a collection of pictures like that."

"A corrosive gas—" Lenk suggested.

Jeremy shook his head vigorously. "No dice, Captain. See that belt? It's plant fiber—something like linen. No gas strong enough to eat up a body would leave that unharmed. And they had skeletons, too—we've found models in what must have been a museum. But we can't even find the fossil skeletons that should be there. Odd, though."

He prodded about among the weapons, shaking his head. "All the weapons in places like this show evidence of one homogeneous design. And all the orna-

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ments are in a T shape, like this one."

He lifted a stainless metal object from the floor and dropped it. "But outside in the square, there are at least two designs. For once, it almost looks as if your idea of an alien invader might be worth considering."

The radio at his side let out a squawk, and he cut it on listening to the thin whisper that came from it. Abruptly, he swung about and headed toward his tractor outside, with Lenk following.

"Aimes has found something," Jeremy said.

They found the linguodynamicist in the gutted ruins of a building into which great concrete troughs led. A rusty ruin in one of the troughs indicated something like a locomotive had once run in it, apparently on great ball bearings. The fat man was pointing excitedly toward something on one of the walls.

At first glance, it seemed to be a picture of more of the green people, apparently undergoing some violent torture. Then their eyes swept on—and they gasped.

Over the green people, three vaguely reptilian monstrosities were hovering, at least twice the size of the others, all equipped with the fanged whips Lenk had seen. One of the green men was apparently trying to defend himself with a huge T-shaped weapon, but the others were helpless. The reptilian monsters sprouted great ugly wings of glaring red from their shoulders.

"The invaders," Lenk said. They were horrible things to see. "But their weapons weren't that big . . ."

"A war poster!" Aimes said bitterly. "It doesn't tell a thing except that there were two groups."

Jeremy studied it, more closely. "Not necessarily even that. It's designed for some emotional effect. But at least, it's a hint that there may have been enemies unlike the ones who lived here. Lenk, can I take the scout ship out?"

"Go ahead," Lenk told him. He frowned at the poster. "Jeremy, if that means the human race is going to have to face an alien invasion from monsters like that . . ."

"It means nothing!"

Jeremy went off, with Aimes apparently in agreement for a change. Lenk stood studying the poster. Finally he ripped it down, surprised to find how strong it still was, and rolled it up to carry back to the ship.

Each world had been razed more recently, and each with the same curious curse. The race had risen to a high culture, and then had seemingly been wiped out in a few brief years. The destruction had accounted for all life on the planet, other than vegetable—and had wiped out even the bones. All that had been left was a col-

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lection of weapons and relics of more doubtful use.

The pattern was the same. The direction was steadily toward Earth, leaping from planet to planet at jumps of thousands of years apart, or perhaps mere hundreds. This planet must have been attacked less than five hundred years before, though it was hard to tell without controlled study of decay here.

Even now Earth might be suffering the invasion! They had been gone nearly three years. And during that time, the monsters might have swooped down hideously out of space.

They might return to find the Earth a wasteland!

His thoughts were a turmoil that grew worse as he stared at the poster. The unknown artist had done his job well. A feeling of horror poured out of it, filling him with an insensate desire to find such monstrosities and rend and maim them, as they had tormented the unfortunate green people.

Graves came stomping up to the control room, carrying lunch, and took one look at the picture. "Serves the heathens right," he grumbled. "Look at them. In hell, suffering from the lashes of the devils of the pit. And still holding up that heathen charm."

Lenk blinked. But Graves' idea wasn't too fantastic, at that. The creatures did look like devils, and the T-shaped object might be a religious symbol. Hadn't some faith or other used the taucross in its worship? And those objects on the third world back had resembled swastikas, which were another religious symbol on Earth.

That part fitted. During periods of extreme stress or danger, man sought some home in his faith. Was it so unnatural that alien races might do the same?

"Isn't there anything hopeful in your religion, Graves?" he asked bitterly, wondering what the man had been like before his conversion to the rigidity he now possessed. He'd probably been as violent an atheist. Usually, a fanatic who switched sides became doubly fanatical.

The revival of religious devotion had begun some fifteen years before, and from what Lenk had seen, the world had been a better and more kindly place for it. But there would always be those who thought the only true devotion lay in the burning of witches. Or maybe Graves needed psychiatric treatment for his morose moods were becoming suspiciously psychotic, and his fanaticism might be only a sign of deeper trouble.

The man went off muttering something about the prophecy and the time being at hand for all to be tried in fire. Lenk went back to staring at the poster until he heard the scout come back. He found Aimes and Jeremy busy unloading what seemed to be loot enough to fill two of the scouts.

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"A whole library, almost intact," Aimes spoke with elation. "And plenty of it is on film, where we can correlate words and images! In two weeks, I'll speak the language like a native."

"Good!" Lenk told him. "Because in about that time, we'll be home on Earth. As long as there's any chance that our people should be warned about invaders, I'm not delaying any longer!"

"You can forget the alien invaders," Jeremy objected.

Then he exploded his thunderbolt. The horrible aliens had proved to be no more than a group of purple-skinned people on the other side of the planet with a quite divergent culture, but of the same basic stock as the green-skinned men. They also exaggerated in their drawings, and to about the same degree.

Fortunately the treasure-trove from the library would give the two men enough for years of work, and required the attention of a full group. They were eager now to take off for Earth and to begin recruiting a new expedition, taking only enough with them for the first basic steps.

Lenk headed directly for the control room. He began setting up the proper directions on the board while Jeremy finished the account.

"But *something's* hitting the planets," he objected. His hand found the main button and the *Clarion* began heading up through the atmosphere on normal gravity warp, until she could reach open space, and go into hyperdrive. "Your monsters prove to be only people—but it still doesn't explain the way disaster follows a line straight toward Earth! And until we know . . ."

"Maybe we'd be better off not knowing," Jeremy said. But he refused to clarify his statement.

Then the hyperdrive went on.

The homeward trip was somewhat different from the others. There were none of the petty fights this time.

Aimes and Jeremy were busy in their own way, decoding the language and collating the material they had.

Graves was with them, grumbling at being around the heathen things, but apparently morbidly fascinated by them.

Lenk could offer no help, and his duty lay with the ship. He pondered over the waves of destruction that seemed to wash toward Earth, and the diminishing cultural levels on the planets beyond. It couldn't be pure coincidence. Nor could he accept the idea that Earth was the center of the universe, and that everything else was necessarily imperfect.

Surprisingly, it was Graves who gave him his first hopeful suggestion. A week had passed, and they were well into the second when the men really caught his attention. Graves was bringing his

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lunch, actually smiling. He frowned.

"What gives?" he asked.

"It's all true!" Graves answered, and there was an inner glow to him. "Just as it's prophecied in *Revelations*. There were times when I had doubts, but now I know. God has set the heathens before me as proof that Armageddon will come, and I have been singled out to bring the glad tidings to His faithful!"

"I thought you didn't believe God would have anything to do with heathens!" Lenk objected. He was trying to recall whether a sudden phase of manic joy was a warning symptom or not.

"I misunderstood. I thought God had forbade space flight. But now it is proved how He loves us. He singled us out to teach us to fly through space that we could learn." Graves gathered up the dishes without noticing that Lenk hadn't touched them and went off in a cloud of ecstasy.

But his point had been made, and Lenk turned it over. Then, with a shout, he headed toward the headquarters of the two remaining scientists. He found them sitting quietly, watching a reel of some kind being projected through an alien device.

"I hear it's Armageddon we're facing," he said.

He expected grins of amusement from them—or at least from Jeremy. But none came. Aimes nodded.

"First progress in all directions. Then a period when religion seems to be in the decline. Then a revival, and a return to faith in the prophecies. All religions agree on those prophecies, Lenk. Revelations refer to the end of Armageddon, when the whole world will wipe itself out before the creation of a better world, in one planet-wide war. The old Norse legends spoke of a Fimbulwinter, when the giants and their gods would destroy the earth in war. And these green-skinned peoples had the same religious prophecies. They came true, too. Armageddon. Contagious Armageddon."

Lenk stared from one to the other, suspecting a joke. "But that still leaves coincidence—the way things move from planet to planet . . ."

"Not at all," Jeremy said. "These people didn't have space travel, but they had some pretty highly developed science. They found what we thought we'd disproved—an ether drift. It would carry spores from planet to planet—and in the exact direction needed to account for what we've seen. Races were more advanced back that way, less so the way we first went, simply because of the time it took the spores to drift."

"And what about the destruction?" Lenk asked woodenly. Their faces were getting him—they looked as if they believed it. "Is there another disease spore to drive races mad?"

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"Nothing like that. Just the natural course of cultures when they pass a certain level," Jeremy answered. "I should have seen that myself. Every race follows the same basic pattern. The only question is how much time we've got left—a week or a thousand years?"

They turned back to their projection device, but Lenk caught the xenologist by the shoulder and swung him back. "But they didn't have space travel! That doesn't fit their pattern. Even if you're right . . ."

Jeremy nodded. "We don't have the secret of immortality, either. And this race did. But, damn it, I'd still like to know what happened to all those skeletons?"

Lenk went back to his control room. And perversely, his thoughts insisted on accepting their explanation. It would be like man to think that important things could only happen on his own home planet, and prophecy an end for his own race, never dreaming it could happen to others.

It would be normal for him to sense somehow out of his own nature what his inevitable end must be—and then to be completely amazed when he found the same end for other races.

But . . .

Space travel—travel at faster than light speeds—had to make a difference. There were the other worlds on the other side of the sun, where men were already planning to colonize. Even if a world might normally blow up in a final wild holocaust, it would have its whole racial pattern changed when it began to spread out among the stars. It would have to have a revival of the old pioneering spirit. There had been the beginnings of that when they left. And with that, such a war could be prevented forever.

He heard Graves moving about in the galley, singing something about graves opening, and grimaced.

Besides, Jeremy had admitted that they didn't have all the answers. The mystery of the vanished skeletons remained—and until that was accounted for, nothing could be considered explained.

He forgot about the skeletons as he began planning how he'd wangle his way into one of the colonies. Then, even if catastrophe did strike Earth in another thousand years or so, the race could go on. Ten more years, and man would be safe . . .

He was feeling almost cheerful as they finally came out of hyperspace near Earth . . . and landed . . .

The skeletons—lay scattered everywhere.

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the celestial blueprint

by . . . Philip José Farmer

The great Vincelleo liked being an artist. It gave him an excuse to turn the universe topsy turvy.

THE ARROGANCE with which B. T. Revanche strode through the outer office of Bioid Electronic was enough to convince anyone that he was a V.V.I.P. His weasel eyes straying neither to left nor right, long fat cigar stabbed straight ahead, quill-like hair bristling in all directions, he was a stout little porcupine of a man. And like that spear-backed creature, he knew that no one would stop him. If they did, they'd regret it—so help them!

Very few people ever paced so fearlessly through the waiting rooms of Bioid. Most persons sat a long time on the "heel-cooling" chairs, and when they were summoned to enter the Sanctum Sanctorum, they were seldom escorted by a Bioid treacher.

But B. T. Revanche—contrary to rumor, the initials did not stand for Blood Thirsty—walked into the skyscraper that overlooked the free city of Messina, and did not bother to announce himself. Taking it for granted that he'd be recognized wherever he went, he did not even switch off his personal anti-espionage field.

Apocalyptical flights of fancy are not unusual in science fiction. But when a writer with Philip José Farmer's gift of laughter embarks on one the outcome may be impossible to predict. He may turn your comfortable world of breakfast, lunch and dinner into some incredible rabbit warren in space, where you'll be served vitamin pills by March hares which would have made Alice blush. Or you may simply meet the great Vincelleo himself.

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Such a gesture of simple courtesy would have seemed to him an affront to his prestige.

He brushed aside those who looked as if they might get in his way, stepped into an anti-gravity elevator, and was whisked up fifty stories to the immense suit of Bioid's GHQ. There a gold-plated treacher picked him up and preceded him, barking out his name with flattering precision.

"Make way for Signor Revanche! One side or a leg off, please! Lo, he cometh!"

Revanche frowned, and bit down on his cigar. He didn't like the slightest suspicion of levity in regard to himself.

Despite a twinge of annoyance, however, he was impressed by the offices. Blazing slogans hung along the walls: *Bioid is more than skin deep! Our trinity: Art & Science & Da Vincelleo! Perfect both inside and out! For the Gods —and Da Vincelleo!*

Diagrams and sketches of the great Messinan's works hung here and there—drawings of the human body in various positions, along with pictures of Bioid robots in corresponding postures.

Poised on plastiglass were germanium brains, startlingly lifelike statues that breathed, and a mounted gorilla, last of his species, shot by the great Da Vincelleo himself. If you stepped on a plate set in the floor while admiring it, it would reach out for you—reach out and roar loud enough to scare the shorts off you.

B. T. Revanche paused for an instant before one of the statues, and manipulated a dial at its base. It was that of an attractive woman clothed in a simple tunic of green-gold gauze, her limbs gazelle-slender in the glare.

"Speak to me, baby," he said, rather coarsely.

The plastiskin woman spoke, her lips arching in a seductive smile. "Good afternoon, man of culture. I am not alive, but there is grace and beauty in all of De Vincelleo's creations, and when you look at them you forget that you have come here to pass an idle hour.

"The veils of the artificial are stripped away, and for a moment you gaze upon beauty naked and unadorned. Would you not like to take me into your arms?"

"I sure would, baby!" Revanche whispered.

He knew, of course, that the statue could not hear him. But by timing his questions to correspond with its disk-recorded utterances an illusion of conversation could be maintained. To imagine even for a brief instant that he could bend so lovely a creature to his will brought out all of the latent sadism in his nature.

"I'm not interested in you as a work of art, baby," he said. "I guess you know that."

"Pass on, man of culture," the statue said. "You linger too long here. If you look about you, you

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will find others more beautiful than I!"

Abruptly the illusion snapped. Scowling, feeling outrageously cheated, Revanche swung about, and resumed his arrogant stride.

There were many vivoil paintings of scenes that gave the illusion, if you looked at them obliquely, of leaves fluttering, birds flying, women walking, and water flowing. All were signed with the name of the famed poet-scientist-financier-engineer-architect-painter-sculptor-cyberneticist and lover of the Second Italian Renaissance—Benangelo Michelardo De Vincelleo.

There was only one man on Earth who was more widely known, more powerful. It was a measure of B. T. Revanche's importance that no practical jokes were played on *him*.

Da Vincelleo was famous for his complicated, rubegoldbergish, and sometimes morbid sense of humor. Visitors had to have strong nerves if they cared to see him—and survive.

It was not unusual for trapdoors to open beneath their feet and drop them, kicking and screaming, down a two-story shaft before they were eased by antigrav to a slow stop. Or for a visitor to find the doorknob to the master's office had turned into a shriveled plastic head. Or to step into what he thought was the office, and find himself neck-deep in water, or some less acceptable fluid.

If the enraged victim stalked off, Da Vincelleo howled with glee. And if a lawsuit followed, he had ways of scaring the unhappy wretch into withdrawing it.

The office help—including the thirty vice-presidents—earned big salaries largely because they boasted iron nerves and ulcer-resistant stomachs. After their initiation into Da Vincelleo's extraordinary humor, many of them became quite sedate about the embarrassing noises and odors they seemingly made when they sat down on their chairs.

They even regarded with the classic calm of the clam's eye the lightbulbs that exploded and flew apart, the mechanical mice, the cockroaches that jumped out of opened drawers, and the water-faucets that straightened out, and squirted them in the face. The few who couldn't take it ceased drawing fabulous salaries, and retired to rest homes.

As it was, none of these disturbing things interfered with Revanche's progress. He didn't even pause on entering the Sanctum Sanctorum itself.

II

Da Vincelleo was sitting behind a large desk with a Cellini-exquisite reading lamp at his elbow. He was clad only in a pair of businessman's electric-blue shorts, and a scarlet beret. His forehead

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was lofty and square, a beautifully sculptured Greek temple dedicated to Thought. But the face that hung beneath was a fox's, and the eyes were twin furnaces, red-rimmed and smouldering. Sometimes beauty burned phoenix-like in them—more often, dollar bills.

Da Vincelleo barely had time to swing the tape-thrower back into its cabinet. He had just finished reviewing a case history of Revanche's life. His agents had done a superb job on Revanche. He knew more about the great financier than that complex man himself, for included in the report were the opinions of ten top-flight psychiatrists. Despite the fact that each of the reports was contradictory, the master of Bioid felt he had an excellent looksee into his rival's psyche.

The Messinan had painstakingly studied Revanche's psych index as a child. He knew that the formative years counted most, for the child was father to the man. Understanding what kind of youngster Revanche had been gave him an advantage from the start.

Therefore, when the magnate bounced bristling into his office, he remained seated, sure that he had the upper hand.

B. T. faced him for a moment without greeting him, giving him the famous "once-over," the scanning that had made strong men shake. His eyes were as hard as a Bioid's. His nose had been heavily powdered, so that the tiny line which circled its tip would be concealed. The cleavage betrayed the artificiality of the tip, which was made of plastoskin.

Revanche let his eyes crawl up and down his host like measuring worms. Then, abruptly, frankly, he came to the point of his visit. His request, and the whirlwind fury with which he thrust it, shook Da Vincelleo out of his sureness, brought him to his feet with a gasp.

"Di', man!" he muttered hoarsely. "What're you saying? That could only mean . . ."

"Da Vincelleo!" barked Revanche. "Da Vincelleo's genius in its full flowering!" He coughed the words out of the side of his mouth, without removing his cigar.

"My agents report you're hard as eternalloy," he went on, without giving the other a chance to reply. "They say you have the artistic genius of a Buonarotti, the ruthless ambition of a Borgia, and the depraved humor of a Caligula!"

The Messinan did not flinch. He looked pleased, as well he might, for Revanche meant the epithets as compliments.

"You'll stop at nothing to get what you want," the financier emphasized. "It was your remorseless drive and executive ability that made you build Bioid with only a servoshoeshiner as a

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start. And you know as well as I do that you stole the money to buy the servo from your blind and penniless mother!"

Da Vincelleo blinked. He had thought no one had known about that. But after all, what did he care? His mother had been paid back. He had buried her in a beautifully designed gold coffin.

"My psychologists say one of your ambitions is to become the richest, most powerful man in the System. Unfortunately, I'm in your way. Well, if you'll do as I ask I'm prepared to turn over my entire holdings to you!"

Da Vincelleo's rusty-brown eyes flaked with red desire. "How could I?" he countered. "If I tried it, I'd have to get out of the System. Every free city, every planet would band together to attack me. The universe would howl for my blood. What's wrong with you, Revanche, that you can't see that? Are you seriously trying to get me killed—or is it your contempt for the creative intellect which prevents you from realizing how the dogs would howl?"

"Let them howl!" Revanche countered. "I'll sign over my entire fortune to you. I'll make you president and owner of my company. We'll draw up a contract which will make me head of Bioid. That way, I'll bear all the responsibility. All, do you hear? You'll actually be directing operations, but you'll be legally blameless. Do you understand? Immediately after the job is finished, Bioid reverts to you."

"And you, Revanche. What are *you* going to do?"

"As soon as my revenge is satisfied, I'll take my yacht to the newly-discovered planet of Alpha Draconis. I'll be beyond extradition there. I'll start business all over again. It's a raw planet that offers a challenge to me this tame System has lost."

"Well, I don't know. I'll need time to think."

Revanche growled, then barked: "My agents say you're famous for making electronicfast decisions. Tell me right now—or I go to your competitor.

"Think, man," he went on quickly. "You're an engineer, and an artist. It will be the culmination, the masterpiece of your career. Historically speaking, Buonarotti or Nero won't be able to hold a candle to you. And you'll also be the richest man under the sun."

Da Vincelleo's eyes swiveled back and forth. Revanche could see the tubes glowing, the switches clickclacking on the tremendous grey board, inside that Greek temple of a forehead. But, he reflected, somewhat hypocritically, it was a temple that needed a whip to drive out the moneychangers.

The Messinan made up his mind suddenly. "Done! I'll get my lawyers, and we'll make the transfer at once. I'll conduct

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operations sub rosa. That's best."

He sat down at his desk, and ran his fingers over several electronic "eyes" and said, "Your hometown is a free city, isn't it?"

"Yes, it has no contracts with the other cities. No alliances. It's a non-co-op all the way. It exists by its smug self-righteous little self!"

"And it refuses to use modern-day mechanisms. Right?"

"Yes. It has reverted back to the horse-and-buggy days. Claims machines take the soul out of a man. Yet, and get this—here's the irony of their set-up. Despising machinery, they're still run by the most mechanical religion, and the most mechanical state, politically-speaking, imaginable. They think the devil invented the steam engine!

"Yet each soul in Dafess City is destined from birth to a certain rank in society. Destined to a certain job, a certain mate, and a certain place in Heaven! They've got a book which they call the Celestial Blueprint. It outlines the future in veiled, allegorical terms. But the Dafesses take every word literally, the letter being their spirit."

"Dafesses?" asked the artist, pretending ignorance.

"After Multum Bonum Dafess, founder and prophet. Anyway, the Blueprint foretells the end of the world, when the inhabitants of Dafess will be saved, and the rest of the world will go to a nice little place reserved for them, called Rejectus.

"Rejectus is furnished with all the comforts of home—with hot water, baked meats, specially-built furniture, highly-trained personal attendants. You get me. Only the Dafesses, the Truncated, will be left untouched after the Day of Judgment. The Untruncated will go to Rejectus."

Da Vincelleo shifted uncomfortably in his chair. When he was a boy, his loving mother had described just such a place as his ultimate destination—if he didn't mend his ways. And, though he had scoffed, his unconscious knew how to pitchfork certain obscure uncalloused figments into his conscious mind.

"You really hate them, don't you?" he gibed.

"I hate them because they're so hateful," Revanche replied. "You would, too, if you were destined to be looked down on all your life by people you knew were stupid. Or if you fell in love, and you were forbidden to marry because the girl wasn't slated by the Elders to be your mate. Or if you were forced to marry some fat cow with the brains of a magpie because the Elders interpreted a certain passage in the Blueprint as referring to you."

His voice grew strained. "That's not all! When I ran away, and made my pile, and could have any woman I wanted I found I couldn't endure any woman not

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from my hometown. Do you want to know why?" He touched his artificial nosetip, his voice soaring in a new scream.

"I'll tell you why! From infanthood I was drilled in the idea that only women with truncated noses were pure, glorious and beautiful. Until I ran away, I never saw a woman with a normal nose. Never! And now, even though I've disguised the mark of my native community, and know, rationally, that untruncated women *are* beautiful, my nerves, my stomach, won't admit it. I think Miss Solar System of 2052 is ugly!

"I could have her anytime, anywhere, understand? But I can't endure her, or any of her sisters. They all look misshapen. And you know what, Da Vincelleo? Despite all my money, I can't get a single beautiful woman in the System to cut off the tip of her nose for me. Not one! And I've met plenty who've said they loved me, and would die for me. But they don't love me enough to snip off the tips of their money-sniffing little noses. Oh, no!"

For an instant there was mute agony in his stare. "Just why do you think I've fought my way up until I'm sitting on top of Sol? So I can take it easy, and play golf or go staryachting? Not B. T. Revanche!

"It's because I hate the guts of every soul in Dafess, every beakcut heaven-elected who won't touch a machine because it might spot him with unholy oil, yet is himself a machine of the lowest type! I'm going to give them the most ironic justification of their creed.

"Funny thing, though," Revanche added, as if it were still puzzling him. "A *statue* of a beautiful woman without a truncated nose does seem to stir me a little. Like that one in the slogan corridor. It shows my basic instincts are still biologically normal."

Da Vincelleo sighed in mock sympathy and began running his fingers over the "eyes" that would summon the chiefs of his staffs. He knew that what he had in mind was going to be his masterwork. The secret excavation beneath Dafess would in itself tax his resources. As he blocked in the calls, his gaze fell upon a romantic historical novel on the desk before him, *Renfrew Rides Again For The Mounted.*

His rocketing brain must have collided with a humorous thought, for his foxlike lips turned up even more. So Revanche wanted irony, did he? And poetic justice?

He looked at the financier but Revanche failed to notice the smile. He was still raving.

III

A month later, the noonday sun above Dafess City began dimming. In less than five minutes it became a completely black ball, and

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remained that somber, and terrifying unnatural hue until it sank below the horizon.

In due course the stars rose in their appointed courses. Then suddenly, without warning, many fell, hurtling across the sky, and disappearing into the bottomless throat of space.

The full moon bounded up. Just as it cleared the horizon, it was struck by a large red star. Wounded, the moon dripped blood.

All these signs were accompanied, outwardly, at least, by great rejoicing in Dafess. The Celestial Blueprint was fulfilling itself. The Time had come. The Truncated were about to get their just reward.

They took purification baths for the first time in their lives. They put on immaculate white robes. Then, en masse, they marched to the great open square in the center of the city, and waited.

Meanwhile, all the Untruncated dwelling in Dafess had been cast out, and all intercourse with the outside had been cut off. Inasmuch as they used no radios, they had only to close the gates of their high-walled city to become incommunicado.

As soon as that was done, and the citizens were collected together to receive their long prophesied payment for holiness, they turned their short snouts upward to await further developments. Nor were they at all disappointed.

As predicted, the sky rolled up like a scroll. It did so with enough thunder to shake the bones and rattle the teeth of even the most hardened, and secretly sceptical.

With the thunder came a blaze of light which revealed a Titanic forge, a cosmic smithy where brawny angels with soot blackening their robes, and smudging their halos stood beating plowshares into swords and spears.

Flame leaped. Bellows pumped by a cherubic host wheezed like asthmatic Prometheuses. Hammers as large as hills clanged on white-hot weaponheads the size of skyscrapers held on anvils large as mountains. Fire and smoke puffed out in a great cloud that threatened to envelop the city, and a clamor beat upon their ears, and bounced from the heavens to the ground and back again.

Then, the sky snapped shut. It clicked like a camera-eye, and the tremendous vision was gone.

But the assembled Truncated were transported with joy. Had they not seen the swords prepared for the smiting of the heathen? All as foretold by the Celestial Blueprint?

An exultant buzz rose from the crowd. It was, however, stilled at once, for, across the blackened sky, lightning flashed, and twisted itself into words that seared the eyes of the multitude. Everyone,

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watched spellbound above them.

YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN.

A vast murmur of pleasure ascended from the crowd. Many of them, it might have been noticed, looked relieved. They wiped sweat off their brows, and glanced furtively at their companions to see if they had noticed the doubt on their faces.

The Elders of the Truncated, gathered upon a raised platform in the center of the square, lifted their arms and began the ritual whose words would start the gears of the final minutes of the Day into spinning.

As Blueprinted, the sky paled and became its normal afternoon azure. The citizens stood hushed, gazing expectantly upwards. After a tense two minutes, the sky suddenly turned black again. This time, however, streaks of blue appeared between the black clots. In a moment, it was seen that the sable hue had been caused by a host of figures, so many they had almost blotted out the blue.

It was as if the sky were an upside-down sea out of which dived a thousand bodies, plunging earth-ward head foremost.

A shout of rapture swelled from the ground to meet them. The dead Truncated were descending from Heaven to crown the faithful living!

But there was one man who did not scream with joy. He was B. T. Revanche, clad in a white robe and showing a nose from which the plastiflesh had been removed. He was there because he had insisted to Da Vincelleo that he could not get his money's worth unless he actually participated.

"You can't taste blood over a TV set," he had growled.

So it was that he was the only one of the throng who did not at the next moment fall silent in an amazed numbness. For the falling figures did not carry laurels with which to crown the faithful on the ground. Far from it. They held swords before them—long and broad two-edged blades that flashed ominously in the bright sunlight.

A scream of mingled outrage and terror tore the air into tatters. Something was wrong! Somebody had thrown a monkey wrench into the celestial gears! The Blueprint had said nothing about this!

The figures swelled in size as they came closer. They slowed their headlong rush, uprighted themselves, and floated feet first to earth. There they paused a minute, glaring about, until the entire army had descended.

The multitude looked at the swordsmen, who were close enough to be discerned in detail. They breathed out one marveling and shocked syllable: "X!"

Yes, each one of the thousands of descended beings was a replica of X, the entity known in other lands and other tongues by a thousand other names. X was one of his signs, and it was the one

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chosen by the prophet Dafess to designate the entity because X was an unknown quantity to the pagans.

It was X, so wrote the prophet, who had visited Dafess in person and assured that man of wisdom that he alone was being given the monopoly of the sacred teachings. Nor did it matter to the prophet that hundreds of others had made prior claims. He, Dafess, was sure that only his descendants were to be X's heirs on earth until such time as the entity returned.

To prove it, they had marched into the wilderness and built this city, and had then written a thousand books to bolster the tradition.

"I will carry a sword," X had promised.

The Dafessians believed this, but they had been assured by their Elders, who were skilled in reading between the lines, that the sword would be for the Untruncated. The peace would be the Truncateds'.

Now X, as foretold, had returned to their city. He brought a sword, and if he also carried peace with him, it was a peace that passed understanding. And his name, in this place and time, had suddenly become Legion.

Each one of the horde was X, but such an X as had never been dreamed of. He was eight feet tall, and made of eternalloy over which plastiskin had been stretched to simulate flesh. So clever was the craftsmanship that only one who knew beforehand, like Revanche, that the creature was begotten in the factory could have told that here was not a living X.

The artistry extended to the magnificent body, which had broad shoulders that tapered to slim hips and long, panther-muscled legs. The delicate feet were shod in brass, as the gods of old Egypt were reputed to be shod.

IV

Revanche, who was seeing for the first time the Messinan's work, scrutinized with cynical elation the creature who had landed closest to him. Awed despite himself, he saw that a fast-whirling halo hovered perhaps a foot above the noble head. Every five seconds the luminous ring changed color.

Even as he watched it, it changed color. From gold it dissolved into a bloody red, and then into a gangrenous green. Next it became a bruise purple, a witching hour black and finally shifted back to gold.

The aspect that startled Revanche most, however, was the face. The false flesh-mask stretched over the metal skull was a grotesque representation of the features of X as seen in the paintings of the Spanish and Italian masters.

There was the somewhat nar-

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row and bearded face with the "sensitive" full-lipped mouth and the gentle nose that poised between straightness and aquilinity. There were the same eyes—flowing and compassionate.

But on the mask those conventional features had been slightly altered, or, as it were, "pulled." Though the lips had been cast with meekness and love on their curves, the smile had been lengthened, and subtly twisted until it had passed over the boundary of a smile and became a snarl.

Whatever fearsome hand had fashioned that mask had known that a snarl is an elongated smile, just as a smile is a modified snarl. The hand had perceived that it was the snarl of the ape that had become the smile of the man, perceived too that, the process of evolution continuing, the smile of the man had passed into the ultra-tender mouth-curving of X.

And now, that smile which was the apex of Nature's efforts, had been remolded, recast, rehammered, and returned into a caricature of itself.

Da Vincelleo was not only a scientist, he was an artist supreme. In that mask he had shown the people of Dafess a reflection of themselves. And he made them see what they had done to X, how they had twisted the face of universal love into an inverted image of their true nature—that of self-love.

The mask was the face of X—*reductio ad absurdum*.

The gentle curve of nostrils had been expanded into derision, and an almost savage fierceness. The glowing compassion of the eyes had become intense with a flame so hot it made the onlookers wonder how the lashes and brows resisted melting, and running into the cavernous eyesockets.

Yet, though fiery, the lineaments combined into a chilling sight. And as there were thousands of the masks, they contributed to a geometrical progression of terror.

Revanche, though he was safe, felt struck with fear and guilt that had been instilled into him when he was a child.

At that moment an Elder who had been eyeing the nearest X, afraid to go into the ritualistic embrace with it because of its fearsome aspect, suddenly ran to it. He threw himself at its feet, clasped its legs, and howled: "Mercy!"

A deep powerful voice that sounded more like the roar of a motor than anything else answered, "Justice!"

Justice was what the Elder had prayed for all of his life. Now he got it.

The automaton lifted the sword, and brought it down with great violence on the Elder's chicken-skinny neck.

"Chuck!" rasped the blade.

"Bump!" replied the head.

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The white-bearded ball rolled on the pavement until it stopped against the curb. Upside down, it looked at everything from a new and possibly revelatory viewpoint, for its expression was not only bewildered and hurt but, for the first time, educated.

Dafess City became bedlam, pandemonium, terror on a cataclysmic scale. The white body of the Truncated broke into fifty thousand fragments that fled here and there, circled, whirled, zigzagged, leaped, crawled, bounded, darted, and lunged.

The legion of X stalked after them. They moved jerkily but swiftly. Above all, they moved relentlessly.

When a cornered person could not get by the awesome figure, he or she would go down on his or her knees and clasp his hands and howl, "Mercy! Mercy!"

"Justice!" roared the immobile lips of the mask.

"Slush!" smacked the lips of the blade.

"Thud!" echoed the head.

Though many skulls rolled, a more or less objective observer, such as Revanche, would have noticed that many more were spared.

They were unharmed for a reason, however, for always the flailing swords forced the mob in a general direction.

They were being herded towards the Temple of the Righteous, a truncated pyramid not far off the square and one which also housed the First Dafess Sacred-Secular Bank and Finance Corporation. Peculiarly enough, the latter institution had grown to such proportions that it had crowded out the former and now occupied the center of the building. The Dafessians had accepted what seemed to them to be the will of X and had moved the holy section to one corner.

Through the huge marble doors the multitude was forced. They had no place else to go, for, wherever they turned, the blazing eye and the flashing sword headed them off.

B. T. Revanche allowed himself to be borne along with the current. Once inside the pyramid, however, he separated himself from the crowd, and ran down a side-passage. The main body was being forced into the open door of the vault. He did not wish to go with them. He had persuaded Da Vincelleo to prepare a private entrance for him.

He ran with all the speed his short legs could muster, puffing hard. When he rounded a corner, he stopped short. His heart, which had been pounding only moderately now suddenly went into the Walpurgisnacht terror music of Moussorgsky's *Night on Bare Mountain*. A Bioid X was stationed down the hall, exactly in front of the mural that concealed the secret door!

He paused, sucked in oxygen

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and courage, and then walked briskly up to the thing, confident that the electronic "interferer" he wore strapped to his belt would neutralize it.

But when he got up to it his suppressed doubt and suspicion were translated into action. The flame-eyed X lifted its sword, and lashed out at him.

"You have been chosen!" the frozen lips roared.

The keen tip missed by a spiderweb taking Revanche's Adam's apple out in one neat chunk.

Appalled, the financier turned and fled.

While he ran, he turned his head and shrilled back, "You are making a mistake!" It was a futile thing to scream out, for the plasti-skin ears were deaf to meaning, if not to noise.

Revanche's hand fumbled on the interferer's switch, and clicked it back and forth. It seemed to be working; it was warm and humming. What then was the matter?

He cursed Da Vincelleo for a strictly third-rate artisan—a bungler, botcher, and bonehead.

Suddenly he was running down another empty corridor, his hard soles bouncing echoes off the faraway walls. *Slap! Slap! Puff! Wheeze!* There was an open window at the distant end of the hall. If only he could make that. . . !

Again he stopped short. Half hidden in the shadows stood an X on guard. It turned its head, and tiger-bright eyes flamed.

Revanche choked off a scream, and whirled. He expected to see the other destroyer behind him, but it was not in sight. When he reached the junction of the two corridors, he saw it standing there, sword held out before it in satiric salute.

There was but one way for Revanche to go—straight back to the bank's vault.

For the first time he realized that he himself, B. T. Revanche, was being herded!

He spun around again to face the oncoming terrors. Frantically, his fingers flicked the switch.

"Stop! Stop! I am your master! I am Revanche! I own you!"

"You are the chosen!" they bellowed.

He whirled, and began running again.

When he reached the vault, he found the X's lined up in a double row, like the guards at a royal reception. They stood facing each other with eyes blazing at eyes, swords held straight out before them and legs widespread above gleaming shoes of brass.

Revanche did not stop but sped down between the guard of honor as if he were afraid they would all begin chopping at once. He had a vision of tiny fragments of meat swimming in a pool of blood, like protozoa jerking in a

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drop of water beneath a microscope.

When he came to the huge steel door of the vault, he stopped and looked within. The floor immediately before him had raised up to form a wall. Beneath it was a round hole that acted as the entrance to a large, metallic, and greasy tube.

Down that funnel had slid the entire population, screaming, wailing, weeping, clutching at one another for support, striking out in a burst of maniacal fury.

Down they had gone notwithstanding, with a gnashing of teeth and tongues, and frantic clawings at the smooth and slippery sides in a desperate attempt to keep from hurtling to the doom they knew awaited them.

How well they knew it! This tube was exactly that which had been foretold in the Celestial Blueprint as the passageway for the heathen when they fell headlong to Rejectus!

Revanche had planned to slip down his private stairway to the little balcony that would overlook the other end of the tube. There he would have watched the doomed spilling out in a white and frenzied flood. There he would have lapped up revenge as a placated Greek ghost would have lapped blood at a Trojan hecatomb.

Instead, trembling, and bursting with terror, he turned and faced the X's. "You haven't got me yet!" he screamed at them.

He kicked the little wheel, that closed the vault from the inside. Once the two hundred ton door clanged shut, it could not be opened as long as the inside wheel remained locked in place. It was an anti-robbery device that he was well aware of, having in his youth once planned to plunder the bank in order to get a start in business.

The huge door swung shut swiftly.

Revanche shook his fist at the onrushing horde, then jerked around, and leaped into the tube. The thunder of brass shoes filled the vault walls. Just before he slid out of view Revanche twisted his head for one last look.

A Bioid was leaping through the air in a desperate endeavor to sacrifice itself by stopping the door with its hard and almost indestructible eternalloy body.

The financier did not see whether or not the Bioir made it, for he dropped abrutly into blackness.

V

Normally, he would have shot down the smooth funnel, inclined at thirty-five degrees, at a terrific speed. But he had not become the most resourceful financier of the solar system for nothing. No wizard in an emergency, he yet liked to be prepared.

So it was that he flicked the switch of the antigrav unit around his waist, and quickly slowed to a

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half-speed. He had wanted to wear a full power machine, but it would have been too bulky to conceal beneath the loose folds of his garments. He had to be content with a moderate rate of descent.

After twenty seconds of sliding, he slipped out of the mouth of the funnel. It was as he had hoped. His checked speed enabled him to drop onto a granite ledge beneath the opening. Even so, he fell close to the very edge. A little more velocity, and he would have gone completely over.

Shuddering, he clutched the rim of rock until he'd regained some of his composure. After a while, he inched forward until his head hung over the lip of the precipice, and he could gaze downward into the abyss.

Below, seemingly a thousand feet down, though he knew the distance must be an illusion fabricated by Da Vincelleo, was a lake of molten lava rising in great billows, then sinking into deep valleys, and releasing gigantic bubbles that rose and burst, and loosed a stench of sulfur that almost suffocated him. Smoke spiralled up past his head, and collected against the roof far above. The heat that ascended was strong enough to crisp his face if he had looked long into it.

Nowhere was there a sign of Dafess's inhabitants. All had been dissolved in the roaring sea of lava, in the hell that had been prophesied for all their enemies.

Quailing, Revanche looked to left and right along the narrow ledge for an avenue of escape. There was none. Both ends tapered off into the rock.

Straight across, perhaps a hundred feet away, was the balcony from which he had hoped to see the show. If he had the guts, he thought, he could step up his antigrav past the danger point and, almost weightless for a second, could leap to the balcony.

If the pack didn't burn out while he was in midair. If he didn't misgauge and miss the balcony . . . if the hellish blast from below didn't crisp him before he completed the jump . . . if . . . .

He stood up, and by the glow thrown up from the bright ocean, he peered up the slide. Another *if*. What if he could brace his legs against the sides of the *O*, and painfully work his way back up?

At that moment a figure shot out of the shadows of the tunnel, a figure that approached at express-train speed and quickly loomed larger and larger. Its blood-colored halo, the mask with the snarl of tenderness, the furnace-door eyes, and the dripping sword—all could be made out in frightening detail.

Like the lost soul he believed he was, Revanche screamed and dropped flat to the ledge, crushing his snipped nose into the

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granite. He moaned, and waited for the clang of armor and the final whistle of the blade through the air before it thudded into his neck.

Above him something dark and monstrous shot out of the *O* and roared by.

Whoosh!

It missed the ledge by many feet, and fell into the lava ocean.

A train of shadows flickered over Revanche. The air was disturbed by the constant passage of flying elephantine bodies.

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

One by one, like living shells exploded out of a circus cannon, they projectiled over their intended prey. By the thousands they meteored over him, eyeballs matching the glare of the lava below, swords automatically slashing out even as they spun and turned over and over, and splashed into the liquid rock.

Whish! Brrr! Whoosh! Splash!

Suddenly—silence.

Slowly, Revanche rose. He could not believe it. He looked over the ledge. Only the bare and boiling sea. He turned and glanced up the tube. Silence and shadows, and the gleaming greasy symbol for zero.

Understanding melted the glacier on his brain. He broke into a wild dance, wept tears for gladness, whistled three times, and shouted, "I've won! Revanche has won! And I've beat them!"

Clippety-clop! Clippety-clop!

The unbelievable ring of iron horseshoes jumped out of the tube's mouth.

Revanche froze in a pirouette, stood poised, then seemed to collapse into a strange loose creature that shambled over to the funnel and leaned backward to look up, like a dazed and stiffnecked Neanderthal.

The liquid film of joy glazed over his mind again, grew white and cold and lumpy.

A mount and its rider were coming out of the darkness and into the brimstone glare. The horse was a nightmare black, its eyeballs burning tiger-yellow bright. It stretched back cruel and foaming lips, and revealed teeth sharp enough to rend him.

A ghost horse, it cried for blood while its magnetic shoes clung briefly to the metal floor before lifting again.

Clippety-clop rang its hooves.

Then it stopped and hung its head down over the tube's lip and fixed Revanche with one demon's eye while its rider dismounted. It remained in that attitude, and did not move even when its master dropped gently onto the ledge to face Revanche.

The financier felt his bulging eyes threaten to leave his head, like balloons tugging at their moorings.

His eyes understood before his brain did.

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They took in a face that was a compound of two persons, a masterly paradox of features and traits: compassionate and merciless, sensitive and coarse, loving and hating. It was a hybrid of X, and of *himself*.

It was not that contradictory face that told him so much, that explained why his interferer had failed to work, even why he had been "herded," and was now facing this fantastic and vengeful creation.

It was something else that told him that not only Defass City but he, Revanche, had been the victim of a Caligulan sense of humor, the butt of the most colossal practical joke the Messinan had ever played.

That something else he had been too shocked to think about. Why had the Bioids, who carried full-power antigravs within their bodies, fallen over the ledge? It was because Da Vincelleo had deliberately destroyed them to raise his hopes. And then had brought out this—this thing—this *joke!* Not satisfied to make Revanche squirm, he had wanted him to sweat blood.

The creature that was drawing a saber from its scabbard, was dressed in a uniform now long dead, but easily recognizable because it had been resurrected recently in many of the romantic historical novels that enjoyed a Solarwide vogue.

It wore the rugged active-service boots, the dun-colored trousers, and the stiff abbreviated jacket of a twentieth century foot soldier of officer caste. It was singing softly from a rigid mouth.

"Death to the enemy."

It was plain whom the enemy was to be.

Revanche fell to his knees.

"Mercy!"

Its saber lifted. The immobile lips roared.

"Justice!"

EPILOGUE

Da Vincelleo, hovering far above Dafess in a spaceship, watched the final scene upon the TV screen before him. Then, sighing because it hurt him to destroy his greatest work of art, he pressed a red button. And he saw the city of Dafess disappear in the old and familiar, but still terrible, mushroom.

"That fool Revanche!" he said. "Did he really think I'd massacre an entire city and take a million to one chance of escaping retribution from the Solar Police?"

He did not think of his being punished for such a deed as being justice. Anything he did was right; retaliation from others would have been vengeance, not justice.

He sighed again. The Project: Dafess, had been enormous. But the worst problem had been Dafess's citizens themselves. Even while an exact replica of the city was being constructed in a

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Canadian wilderness, far from the real Dafess, his staff was tackling the necessary research, of which the hardest part had been both historical and technological. One, finding out exactly what each citizen looked and acted and talked like. Two, building Bioids that looked, acted, and talked like the original.

Of course, the whole illusion had been designed to fool only one man and had had to be kept in existence less than ten hours.

A minor, though fascinating problem had been that of getting blood to spout from the severed heads and concealing the springs and wires inside the wrecked bodies.

At that moment Revanche, very much alive in his star yacht poised just above the stratosphere, pressed a button. The screen on his desk showed him a blur that was the missile he'd just launched and the target, Da Vincelleo's ship. Then there was incandescence, followed by the old familiar mushroom.

Revanche growled, "That fool!" and he turned away from the screen. His face was smug as a porcupine's that has loaded up on tender and vitamin rich birch-bark. He felt exceedingly satisfied. Why not? Watching the destruction of the synthetic citizens of the synthetic city of Dafess had been almost as rewarding as seeing the real city delivered to judgment. The process had been a type of psychodrama that any good psychiatrist would have recommended for emotional catharsis.

For the financier trusted no man, and though Da Vincelleo had thought his double-crossing project was a secret, he could not hide it from the richest and most inquisitive human in the system. Nor had he guessed that Revanche would then employ Bioid's competitor to fashion an electronic proxy of himself.

Revanche had suffered—long distance—as his plastiskin counterpart had seemed to suffer. Its terror-stricken face was his, and when it had yelled with frustration and screamed for mercy, he had done so also.

But when he saw the terrible parody of himself lop off his proxy's head with a saber, he had felt as if he'd been killed and then come to life again.

He'd been seized with a laughter that forced him to grip his chair to keep from falling to the floor. And now, very much calmed and smoking a new cigar, he felt wonderful about his mockup's death.

He no longer had a barely suppressed fear of being hurled by his deity into the molten ocean of Rejectus. It was as if he had paid for his own sins through the mechanical scapegoat and now could live on with an untroubled conscience.

He took the cigar from his mouth and chortled.

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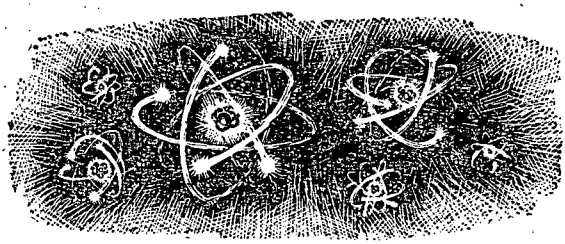
And a third mushroom suddenly sprouted.

Revanche and his star yacht went back to the elements in its white heart, far hotter than the flames of Rejectus.

Da Vincelleo had been a thorough man, as suspicious as Revanche himself. Shortly after he had made his deal with the financier, he had had a machine built which keyed in to the personal pattern of his *kappa* brainwaves. If that pattern disappeared, quit radiating, a circuit was activated which sent a "bloodhound" missile soaring up into the air from a buried pit in the city of Messina, a missile whose electromagnetic nose sniffed for the scent of Revanche's *kappa* brainwaves and would not stop until it homed in on its target.

Thus, if the financier had paused long enough to light up his cigar *before* pressing the button that disposed of his enemy, he would have finished smoking it and many more after it.

For Da Vincelleo had been convinced that Revanche had perished with the false city of Dafess, and he was just reaching out to flick the bloodhound's deactivation stud when Revanche's missile interrupted him forever.



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too close to the forest

by . . .
Bryce Walton & Al Reynolds

The dazzling difference between failure and success hung from a spidery thread. And established a barrier no ESP could sever.

I WON'T forget that evening of the big experiment. If the truth is ever known about that evening maybe the world will never forget it either. I got there first, and went into the hall they'd let Dr. Marsten have for the evening on the Revere University Campus. Dr. Marsten was sitting there alone behind a table with a few papers in front of him. A single lamp burned that spotlighted his face like some old classic sculpture in a gallery.

That's the way I remember him. Small, with delicate yet lined features, and his hair, still dark, and his eyes bright and even darker from peering beyond the frontiers of the human mind.

I never saw him again after that night, not in any way I want to remember.

He offered his hand. It was hot and damp and shaking a little. Tension had drawn his mouth tight, even when he managed to smile at me and indicate a chair. I sat down.

"I'm so glad you're here, Max," he said. "It is right that you share in this triumph." I could feel the tension behind his words. It was

We roll out the red carpet for Bryce Walton and Al Reynolds. New to us—but not to you. Their's is the delicate tale of a sensitive mind, the mind of Dr. Marsten who tried frantically to reach his colleagues. Only to prove that over-familiarity with a subject, reiteration of detail, may obliterate the essential vital point to success of a great scientific experimentation.

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the climax of his life. He would either vindicate himself or go, disgraced, into oblivion.

He didn't have to explain any of this to me. I guess I was closer to Dr. Marsten than anyone had ever been, except his wife, of course. She had died ten years before. From that time on he lived for his work in experimental psychology. Until finally, much to everyone's shock and disbelief, he turned to *para*psychology. And I worked with him against the heartbreakingly rigid demands of the scientific method.

I was only a graduate student working for my Doctor's degree at the time. A term paper I'd done had impressed Marsten and he had gotten me a scholarship. During the four years after that I was his assistant and confidant.

That is, I was until he got completely wrapped up in parapsychology, Extra Sensory Perception. At that point he abruptly dismissed me.

I knew why. I argued about it but he was adamant. He knew what experiments in a field tinged with mysticism and the supernatural might do to my scientific professional career. As it finally did to his. He didn't want to involve me.

He was ostracized, dismissed from the University as a faculty member. The scientific world depends on its open mind, within the bounds of its own techniques. But the unknown worlds of the human mind are sometimes very hard to fit into the rigid scientific disciplines and methodologies.

Rhine's experiments satisfy those who want desperately, many of them for highly personal reasons and needs, to believe in Extra Sensory Perception. It doesn't satisfy the scientific mind. Its "scientific validity," based on averages greater than those of "chance," are not adequate for the scientific method. Too many variables. But Marsten had told me he had gone much further than Rhine or his disciples. And now he'd ask me to be here for the culmination of his ten years of work.

"My theories will now be proven," he'd written me. "I want you to see the proof I shall offer on the opening of new worlds of the human mind . . ."

He'd published books on the subject but the world of science labeled them psuedo-science, stuff for the psychic research societies and those who take photographs of ectoplasm.

I believed in Marsten to an extent. But at the same time I doubted that he could prove his contentions. I knew he was staking everything on his faith in himself tonight. The biggest men in science—men who had respected Marsten as a scientific mind until he went off the deep end, they thought—were going to appear, allow him to use them in his experiment to prove his theories.

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They were big men in heart as well as reputation. But Marsten had done some remarkable work in experimental psychology in the past and I guess no one, outside of myself, wanted to see him regain his professional respect and reputation as much as did those men: De Vaca, Professor of English Literature; H. Morrison, Professor of Biology; M. Borinsky, Professor of History and specialist in the History of Russia; Billingsley, Professor of Theosophy; Marian Adler, Psychology Professor who happened to have the same surname as Freud's disciple, and there were others.

They had all agreed to Marsten's request to be a part of his final experiment to prove the existence of mental telepathy.

"I'll prove mental telepathy tonight so they'll have to believe it," Marsten said softly. "And think what that will mean. New fields of research will open the gates to human freedom and escape from man's sad mental limitations. It will bring official, legalized scientific research into the mind that will end the ills of mankind!" He leaned forward and gripped my wrist. His forehead was wet. His voice was hoarse. "It'll work tonight, Max!"

"And if it doesn't?" I asked.

He sat back, shook his head. "It will," he said. "I know because I've proven it to myself. But—but if it doesn't—" He shrugged. "I'm through. It will be the end of the road for me."

The way he said it, more than the words, frightened me. I knew how intense he was, how much his work meant to him. And when he spoke like that I knew—I feared—that Marsten had become emotionally unbalanced.

"That's ridiculous," I said. "You can go ahead with your work, regardless. Some of the greatest scientific advances have been made against the popular grain. In fact, most scientific work! Remember Galileo, Newton . . ."

He shrugged. "Matter of temperament. I know my own limitations, my weaknesses. But I *know* this experiment tonight will work! Listen, Max—I don't care about publicity. I've invited no reporters. I want only these scientists to know, that's all. They're the ones who have to be convinced. To give the field of parapsychology respectability so that the vast resources and brains of science can be turned loose on it, that's all I want."

He looked at me intense, earnest. "Max," he whispered, "the rumors that are circulating about me—I've heard about them. They think I'm unbalanced mentally! You've heard that?"

I was embarrassed. I had heard. Everyone had. I said, "You're respected as an honest and scholarly man, a genius in the field of psychology. These men, if they speculate at all along that

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line, think you've deluded yourself by the 'will to believe' in your own experiments. Wishful thinking, some call it. I don't believe anyone thinks your capabilities in normal psychological work have diminished. If anything, they're probably stronger."

He managed a thin laugh. "Well," he said. "Tonight will prove something, anyway."

I remember the greetings when the other scientists arrived, the slightly embarrassed attempts at conviviality. Within half an hour all of the nine men arrived and were seated before Marsten's table. All his former co-professors at the University where Marsten no longer taught. I could see that Marsten was obsessed almost as much with proving that these men's lack of faith in him was wrong, as he was in proving his own theories right.

I felt apprehensive as Marsten started to talk. But as his self-confidence, his obvious faith in himself began to show, I felt better. His enthusiasm and confidence was so contagious that it even affected the nine scientists so that they, too, became more interested than embarrassed.

"Gentlemen," Marsten was saying, "you know from my letters why you have been asked here. Needless to say, I am grateful beyond words that you came to be shown proof of what you've refused so far to believe—and with good cause. Tonight I shall demonstrate scientifically the existence of mental telepathy. I shall prove to all of you in an interrelated and undeniable way so that there will be no doubt concerning my facts. No doubt whatsoever."

No one else said anything. Feet shuffled and there was a cough or two. All of them knew what this would mean if Marsten could prove his theories; what it would mean to him if he failed.

Marsten went on. "If I show that *you* can read *my* mind, that should prove my theories to your satisfaction. I shall do this without any hypnotic suggestion.

"I have not told anyone of the techniques which I've worked out over a period of years, not even Max Reinach here. This will be my first group demonstration of my theories. Until I was ready to give conclusive scientific proof I did not confide fully to anyone, even to Max, my closest associate."

He had told me a little, that is true. So little, in fact, that I knew not much more about his theories than the rest of the scientists gathered here tonight.

". . . and so, gentlemen, I shall get the experiment over with as quickly as possible. There are two rooms, as you see, one at each end of the hall. I shall go into one room and lock the door. It is impossible for me to see or hear anything that goes on outside that room. Before the experiment

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starts I shall ask you to examine that room yourselves, in any way you like."

De Vaca and Dr. Morrison went into the room, examined it thoroughly. Then one of them stayed inside while the other came out, closed the door, tested for sound. Finally, Morrison said, "We agree—it is a sound-proof room. It is bare inside. There is no opening other than this door."

"Thank you," Marsten said. "Max, will you hand each of these gentlemen one of these cards and a pencil." I took the cards and pencils from his table and handed them out.

"Now," Marsten said, "one by one, you will go, in any sequence you desire, into that other room and lock the door. I will be locked in this room that you checked. A bell in the room you are in will ring. That will be the signal for you to leave the room and for someone else to go in.

"During the time each of you is in that room, please keep your minds open, receptive for a thought impression you will receive from me. That's all there is to the experiment. Excepting this —" he lifted a sealed envelope from the table. "This contains proof which will verify the success of this experiment. I leave it here. You will, as a committee, lock it in the safe upstairs in the business office. Take it from the safe only after the experiment is over."

So the experiment started. I sat over by the wall, watching their faces. I observed the way each man, in his own highly personalized way, got up and played his part in an experiment which he believed to be ridiculous.

I remember how each of them looked and acted as they, one by one, went into that room, locked the door, and came out later when the bell rang. I studied closely their faces as each came out. They went in embarrassed silence back to their chairs and sat down, each holding a card upon which they had written the thought supposedly received from Marsten.

I felt the terrific tension. The room seemed hot and stifling as Marsten came out of his room finally and went over to the table. His face was pale and moist. His hair was wet and stringy around his ears and over his forehead.

The ticking of the clock suddenly sounded louder and louder. The breathing of the nine men seated there got louder. I could hear my own heart going like a turbine in my chest. Now we waited for Marsten to speak.

He glanced at me, motioned to me. I got up and went over to the table. His eyes were dark and bright. "Collect the cards will you please, Max, and give them to me?"

I did that. I didn't want to give them to him. I had a crazy idea of running out of there with the cards. Then it would be my fault that Marsten had failed. I

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didn't believe in Marsten then. I wanted to. I'd worked with him, knew his greatness, his integrity and sincerity. I knew he might be emotionally unstable. I wanted to believe, but I wasn't convinced at all. Man is ever credulous in the wrong place, at the wrong time, about the wrong things. We swallow the emotional screamings of demagogues, reject the quiet discoveries of great men who only do not know the techniques of salesmanship, of propaganda.

But I put the cards on the table beside Marsten. Then, as he picked them up I began to feel differently. I don't know why. Perhaps his bravery, his courage and tenacity, his faith in his own beliefs, overwhelmed me suddenly.

I was with him then. Somehow, all at once, I *knew* he was right. Suddenly I had all the old confidence and trust in his genius that I had had years before when I'd worked with him so closely.

The silence in the room then was paralyzing, a thick binding tension. The nine professors stood up as if sitting now was untenable. Professors of English literature, Biology, Astronomy, Music, Medicine, Psychiatry, History, Physical Education, Religion. They stood there waiting for Marsten to check their written thoughts on the cards.

Marsten spread them out like a hand of bridge and looked at them. His muscles jerked once, as from a galvanic reflex, like a man suddenly touched with a high-tension wire.

He cried out, as from deep and wracking mental pain. The sound hit into the room's silence like metal into flesh. He dropped the cards abruptly and they spilled over the table. He stared at the floor between the table and the nine men facing him.

His voice sounded far away, muffled. "Gentlemen, I've—failed. I've—failed—miserably!"

He swayed. I ran around the table and caught him to stop his falling. His muscles quivered under my hands.

He pushed me away. His eyes were hot and a little wild. Then he stood up straight, like an old soldier at bay.

"I'm sorry you have had your valuable time imposed upon so inexcusably. No need—no need now, I assure you, even to open the sealed envelope. I missed—missed in every case except that of Professor Adler. My success with him I attribute entirely to chance."

He took a step backward and whispered, "Goodnight, gentlemen. Goodnight and—goodbye."

I called out, but he went on out the door. I ran after him into the hall, but he had ducked out a side door. I followed him across the darkening campus. But his car roared away before I could reach him. I did not have a car so I could not follow.

I didn't talk to the others. I

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went home. And I began to phone, trying to locate Marsten. I called every few minutes and I called the police and everyone who knew him. The police said they would put out a dragnet if he didn't show up within the next twenty-four hours. I had explained he was in great distress, that I was afraid of what he might do.

I didn't sleep well that night. There was no word about Marsten's whereabouts in the morning. I began to think that perhaps suicide was the only way out for him now. I doubted that he would be able to face the failure of that experiment he had planned for so long, and on which he had staked all of what remained of his reputation.

I managed to get three of the nine scientists to be with me when I went to the office at the university and opened the safe and took out that sealed envelope next morning. De Vaca, a small nervous man with constant flighty gestures, Morrison, biology professor, a solemn, bald little man, and Billingsley who had a jaw like a prizefighter, and was big and gruff, but brilliant.

They, too, were worried about Marsten's disappearance, considering his state of mind. Now we all wanted to know what that envelope contained. Maybe its contents would assist us in helping Marsten—if we found him.

After examining the contents of the sealed envelope, we sat around the table and no one said anything for what seemed a long time. Finally De Vaca said, "He failed all right. But it was a wonderful plan, and certainly we could no longer deny the existence of mental telepathy had this idea worked out as he planned it."

Morrison said, "But we must find Marsten before he kills himself. He should be institutionalized, now, his mental unbalance treated . . ."

The others agreed. They began to discuss where to begin the search for Marsten.

I thought about what we had found in that sealed envelope. Marsten had had a great idea all right. Although the professors had selected their own order of going into the testing room, Professor Marsten had arbitrarily numbered each of them from 1 to 9. Using the subjects which they taught instead of their names, he expected to prove mental telep-athy. In the envelope he had left this list:

1. *Thackeray—Professor of English Literature*
2. *Evolution——Professor of Biology*
3. *Lungs——Professor of Anatomy*
4. *Elgar——Professor of Music*
5. *Phenobarbital——Professor of Medicine*

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6. *Adler——Professor of Psychology*
7. *Trotsky——Professor of Russian History*
8. *Hockey——Professor in Physical Education*
9. *Yuletide——Professor in Theology*

Each participant was to have received a specific word or name which was directly connected with his field of teaching. The first letter of each word, formed an acrostic reading down which spelled out:

T-E-L-E-P-A-T-H-Y

The cards the professors had handed in were also there beside us on the table. I went through those cards again, slowly, while De Vaca and Morrison and Billingsley debated as to the best way of locating Marsten.

I wanted to do more than just find Marsten. I wanted to be able to help him when he was found. The cards the professors had handed in listed what they thought they had received from Marsten via mental telepathy. This is what they had written:

1. *Shakespeare——Professor of English Literature*
2. *Darwin——Professor of Biology*
3. *Kidney——Professor of Anatomy*
4. *Debussey—Professor of Music*
5. *Opiate——Professor of Medicine*
6. *Adler——Professor of Psychology*
7. *Stalin—Professor in Russian History*
8. *Golf——Professor in Physical Education*
9. *Xmas—Professor in Theosophy.*

Each professor had written something *similar* in meaning to what Marsten had tried, through mental telepathy, to put into their minds. Except in the case of the Professor of Psychology. And in that one case there was a direct hit, as Marsten had said.

Oddly enough, Marian Adler had the same surname as the great psychoanalyst, Alfred Adler, whom Marsten had chosen for one of his projected thoughts. To me, the results did not seem the complete failure Marsten thought them. But of course Marsten had wanted to hit it one hundred percent. Nothing less would have satisfied a scientific mind like his in such an experiment.

The acrostic: S-D-K-D-O-A-S-G-X formed by the words apparently received by the Professors in that locked room was merely a jumble of letters, spelling out nothing of any meaning.

Finally, we parted to go our separate ways. I took the envelope and cards and went home. The others, with cars, would search for Marsten. I'd forgotten my work,

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my thesis, everything. I wanted to figure out something, but I didn't even know what it was. I had a most unscientific idea—a hunch!

All day I thought and sweated over that envelope's contents, the cards, the two acrostics:

T-E-L-E-P-A-T-H-Y
and
S-D-K-D-O-A-S-G-X

I worked all that day and through the night, but I could make no connection between the two acrostics.

Meanwhile, the search continued for Marsten, but there was no sign of him or his car. I sweated it out, trying to convince myself that he wasn't already dead, that when he was found I, meanwhile, would have found something in the remains of that experiment to give him new zest, new hope.

But I didn't know the technique he had used. I kept thinking of that one successful hit in the case of Doctor Adler. Here, I thought desperately, might be the clue to his technique . . . I stayed up and worked at it another day, and into another night. If I could only prove that the experiment hadn't failed completely, then that information could be broadcast, televised, and maybe Marsten would see or hear, if he still lived, and then would want to keep on living.

It was odd how positive I was that there was something there that would prove Marsten right. Maybe we're all aware of much more than we think we are—and could have greater awareness if we could only raise a few mental curtains . . .

I pounded my brains out on that Adler angle. She was the only woman in the group. Maybe that had meaning. I went through some of Marsten's notes, but there weren't enough of them, and they weren't the basic ones. I skimmed through books on Extra Sensory Perception. But I didn't get anywhere . . .

And then the phone rang and I answered it. It was Police Lieutenant Walters, at the local precinct station. He had promised to let me know at once if they found any trace of Marsten.

"We found him," Walters said tersely. "He's on a ledge outside a window of the Loeb Building at Fifth and Pinehurst!"

I said, "My God!" Then, "Will you pick me up?"

He said, "Yes. Maybe you can talk him out of it. You were close to him. We've sent the emergency squads over. Never know when they'll jump when they're like that. One move at the wrong time and that makes them jump. I'll be there in five minutes . . ."

I felt sick with panic and hopelessness. Then, in that moment, out of nowhere, came the flash—the key—it shone there before me all at once, the answer I'd been

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looking for! I knew it had been there all along and my mind had gone around it time and again. And suddenly it was there, conscious and clear.

I arranged it all in my mind as we rode over to Fifth and Pinehurst, the police lieutenant intent on driving speedily through the heavy traffic.

If I could get to Marsten in time, I could save him! I'd had the explanation all along—I'd read it in a scientific journal, in reports I'd skimmed through on ESP. Marsten would understand—if I could get to him in time! He hadn't been wrong. And I could give him proof . . .

A big crowd was gathered in the early dawn, standing silently in the street, staring upward at the small figure on the ledge. The wind was cold and steady and in the early morning greyness I saw Marsten, thirty stories up, hunched against the side of the building. He wasn't a man to exhibit himself for melodramatic recognition. Therefore, I knew he must be very far out of his normal mind.

I am sure he went up there to jump immediately. But he had been there an hour, now. Perhaps, I thought, he was trying to figure, in a last desperate moment, where his experiment had failed. Trying to find in the mysterious, senseless chaos of embryonic human thought, a reason why he should not die . . .

The police got me through the crowd, inside the building and into an elevator. I ran down the hall of the thirtieth floor to the room where policemen were working with ropes and steel hooks. I heard one of them say, "We can't reach him. It's no use."

I stuck my head out the window, called Marsten's name. But the wind tore the words away, sent them in the opposite direction. He didn't turn his head. I could barely make out his features, dead white and void of expression.

"Don't jump, for God's sake!" I called over and over. "Professor, *you were right! The experiment was a success! Listen to me! It was a success!*"

I could see the uplifted faces down below, a blanket, a net they had stretched down there, both looking no bigger than a checker square.

Marsten didn't seem to hear me, but I kept yelling, trying to make him hear. I fought the wind, and whatever barrier there was between Marsten and myself. But he didn't turn, didn't seem to hear me, seemed unaware of me, of anything that went on around him.

I shouted the explanation to him of what I'd suddenly realized:

In these ESP tests the receiving impressions are the symbols on the various cards in a deck. Basically, the tests in ESP experiments all come down to one thing—the

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participants try, without seeing the cards, to identify the symbols on each card in a deck as they draw them from the pack.

In reviewing the results of these tests, it often happens that participants, extra-ordinarily gifted with what is called 'psychic ability,' have long runs of picking exact cards. But these runs are sometimes on the cards—*before the one that is being turned, or on the one after the one turned.*

In other words, if cards A-B-C-D-E-F-G have been turned, many times the participant will call B when C is turned, C when D is turned, E when F is turned, and so forth. There are various theories for the cause of this factor. It is a factor that comes up time and again. Marsten knew that. But in that intense moment he must have overlooked it. It hadn't occurred to any of the others there, either. We were all too close to the forest to see the trees . . .

And I screamed at the Professor against the wind and the morning: S-D-K-D-O-A-S-G-X form an acrostic, and they are all one letter in the alphabet *before* the letters that spell out T-E-L-E-P-A-T-H-Y! Except in the letter A, for Adler. There could not be a letter before A in the alphabet. So, there was no displacement factor on Adler's card.

"Marsten, listen to me! Can you hear? Can't you understand? The *displacement factor, Marsten!* The *Displacement Factor—"*

He never saw me, never heard me of that I am certain. Everything seemed too late for Marsten. I saw him lean forward, drop off the ledge. My words followed him crazily down as he fell: *"The displacement factor—"*

Maybe before he struck the concrete down there he realized that he had been right, that the experiment had not failed. I hope so. But I think, in view of his tragic death, that Professor Marsten deserves this explanation, this proof that his work was not in vain. And because of what his hypothesis may mean to scientists of the future.

It isn't conclusive enough for the strictly disciplined scientific method. But though others may think his experiment inconclusive, I *know* that Professor Marsten proved the existence of Mental Telepathy.

So I'm going to take up where Marsten ended his experiment—and his life—and I'm going to do it even though it may mean the end of my career in orthodox science.

And maybe if I keep working at it, and thinking about it long enough and steadily enough, Marsten will receive my thought. Then, wherever he is now, if he doesn't already know, maybe I'll be able to tell him that he didn't fail . . .

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a world to die for

by . . . Sam Carson

Titans respect men who create, and add to the betterment of others. Surely it is brave to be a Titan and muchly in love.

THEY CUT the Markab out of hyper space three parsecs from Deneb, on the North Galactic Polar course. Three men were aboard the space yacht. The alien ship they expected to find was a thousand times greater. By standards of the Galactic Service, the Markab was on a suicide mission.

Rik Guelf, the Markab's pilot, conned sync parallax tapes, the robot master controls and set the screen charts. In came Captain Rodolph, stout and weary from twenty years of patrol service. Behind was Pere Danold, thin and lithe, with feral eyes and tight lips.

"I'm tossing out telar screens. If they're breaking out of hyper, as the outposts charted, we won't wait long."

"You hope," Danold's sardonic voice jeered. "Your phantom ship paralyzes five ships of the line beyond Altair, so they send for us to blast it."

Captain Rodolph looked the younger man over thoughtfully. "You volunteered back at Fleet Base Eighty."

Another new name for these pages. Here's Sam Carson, veteran writer, TV and Radio editor, former roving newspaperman, and a father who is now "going through an involuntary course in nuclear physics" as he keeps up with his son, a chemical engineer and physicist at the University of Tennessee. And when Sam Carson sets foot on an alien planet the hills and valleys as well as the people seem to pulse with light and vitality. It's truly rarely that a writer seated behind his desk can summon such travel magic.

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Danold settled to a bench, legs outstretched. "Why not? When the brass installs the newest trinogen gun in this dinky yacht," he laughed mirthlessly, "one that can blast the ears off a cruiser at a thousand miles—well, I wanted a crack. Trouble was," he added, "I thought we were after a Vegan, making a sneak attack."

"You were told it was a mission beyond the call of duty," Rodolph said sternly. "None of the ships meeting the alien had a trinogen battery. We can't carry but one. We've got the fast drive. They figure we can get in one shot and duck."

"I still say it would make sense to arm a fleet with trinogens," Danold grumbled. "If that alien has a transparent ship five miles long, which I gravely doubt on both counts."

Rik Guelf or Captain Rodolph could have pointed out that fully two hundred Galactic Service crewmen had seen the ship, that beams passed through it and only telar caught its outlines. And there was no doubt of the alien's fire power. It had paralyzed electronic systems for hours, leaving the fleet marooned while it moved majestically onward.

The Markab was Guelf's, the gift of his mother's family. They had influence and power, enough to provide as fleet a small space craft as the Galaxy could boast, and to borrow Captain Rodolph from patrol service.

There was a reason for all this. Eiler Guelf, Rik's father, ranked foremost among explorers, had been lost with his ship, the Perseid, five years before. That was in the Rigel sector. And a half dozen outposts had caught the strange message Eiler Guelf sent before he vanished.

". . . Met crystal woman . . . alien ship . . . am—"

Telar screens reached out by means of meshed beams. Streaks showed the path of meteors, leaving ghostly streaks. Once a freighter broke out of hyper, vanished after making a period check.

"Met crystal woman . . ." Well, out of reports by the Galactic Service ships crippled by the great alien visitor, there were two which were responsible for the Markab's presence here, attempting to intercept. Two observers had seen —or thought they had—the titan-like outlines of a woman aboard the ship.

Was *she* the crystal woman? Captain Rodolph thought so. Danold wasn't consulted. He was the gift of Galactic Service, and that organization was curious to know if a trinogen gun could stand up against the strange but powerful blue beams the alien possessed.

Rik Guelf had to know if his father was alive. And there was a chance . . .

For centuries, since Earthmen had left their own solar system

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and penetrated the galaxy with hyper space drive, there had been rumors of a giant race, the Titans.

The strange, cold intelligent life forms of the Rigellian cluster had their version of Titans, but they seemed afraid, or at least uninterested, in passing information to Galactic Service. Rigellians abhored Earthmen. They traded, kept diplomatic contacts. Beyond that, they refused all contact.

It was in territory of the Rigel federation that the elder Guelf had traveled, nearing the end of a five year charting voyage. And he had said in his last report that bits of information gained along his route bore out reports of a giant ship crossing the galaxy. The Perseid had tried to intercept the visitor.

Rik Guelf was acting more on a hunch than on logic. He believed the Perseid was captured, that the aliens—Titans or not—came into the galaxy hunting specimens.

Maybe it was logical after all. Captain Rodolph was inclined to accept Rik's theory, with reservations. He had agreed to let Rik try his hand at making contact should they meet the alien. But he also told Danold to be ready.

Danold was ready. He believed the trinogen gun, with an area of destruction so great that at extreme range error of one hundred miles was negligible, was master of space warships. And he was eager to try out his belief.

On the third day, the robot scanners idling, alarm bells rang suddenly. Rik was in his bunk. He collided with Danold in the corridor, racing to the scanning room.

Captain Rodolph came in slowly, breathing hard. He stared, as did Rik and Danold, at the incredible sight. On all screens a ship showed, oval in shape, tremendous in length. Its substance could not be determined for skeleton girders, even machines, showed vaguely. And moving slowly on the screen, strode a woman in white robes!

"By the grace of Polaris," Captain Rodolph whispered, "it's five miles long, if it's a meter."

Danold recovered first. "She's inside fifty miles. Let's blast." He whirled, headed for the gunnery room. "Danold," Rodolph shouted. "Hold it!"

For a moment Danold seemed about to defy orders. Then discipline told. "May I remind you, sir," he snapped, "that surprise is the element, the factor if we're attacking."

Rodolph didn't answer. He nodded to Rik. "Use all frequencies. Challenge in service code."

Rik called. The huge ship, moving slowly, disdained to answer. The woman was dimly visible, staring their way. Rik drew in a long breath. "Whoever you are," he said, "please acknowledge."

Danold slammed the door of the gunnery room. Even then

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Captain Rodolph wasn't prepared for his insubordinate act. Too late he felt the shudder, the roar of the trinogen gun.

"The fool!" Rodolph cried. He reached for a switch which cut off power to the gunnery room. But he was too late. As his hand touched the button a series of crimson patches splashed along the alien ship's hull.

For a moment Guelf believed that the trinogen gun had made a hit. Then the splashes faded into nothingness and there stood the ship, hull as semi-transparent as ever.

"We're in for it now!" Rodolph shouted. "The fool didn't touch her!"

The woman stood rigid, her figure was clearer now. Slowly she moved an arm and a column of intense brilliant blue, shot toward the Markab . . . And darkness enveloped them . . .

Gravity fled the Markab. Tumbling, Guelf caromed into Rodolph. They were moving, but Rik Guelf never knew even that for his head crashed against the wall and he blacked out . . .

When he came to, lights were on again. Guelf felt a heaviness as he lifted his body. He saw Captain Rodolph standing, gazing at a row of machines that were gliding into the control room from the passage-way.

The machines were small, like canisters on struts, with tiny casters beneath them. And each canister had four tentacles. They emitted intense, bluish light.

Captain Rodolph looked down at Guelf. "Take it easy," he said. "We've been captured. And these things"—he pointed to the machines—"are It."

Guelf's head ached. He staggered to his feet. "Danold?" he gasped.

"They took him away right after opening our lock. I don't know why—or why they didn't take us, too."

A voice, low and compelling, spoke in Rik Guelf's brain. *"You and Captain Rodolph will quit your ship. I advise you not to resist."*

Rodolph jumped and Guelf knew he had received the order too. The robots wheeled aside, let them pass. "We're in her ship," Rodolph said. "She hooked us—lassoed us is a better word. Here we are."

The compartment was awe-inspiring in size. A blue vaulted ceiling rose a thousand feet overhead. From wall to wall was the same distance. The floor beneath them was metallic, not translucent. It appeared as solid as any Earth metal.

Huge conduits ran to machines that the squat robots were tending. The equipment rose a hundred feet high.

Then they saw Danold. He was walking slowly toward a moving runway. Robots stepped on and off the runway as they went about

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what seemed to be routine matters. And the same calm voice which had spoken soundlessly into their minds, now bade them step on the runway.

They did so, traveled toward a screen and through it into a long, dim corridor.

And at the end of the corridor stood the Crystal Woman.

She was a giantess—a Titan—. She sat in a chair, white robe trailing from her shoulders and fully a hundred feet beyond her sandaled feet. And the three men stood like midgets before her, stared, rendered silent with awe as the runway slowed to a full stop.

They waited, Danold with legs outspread, defiant, hands on blasters which he carried in holsters. Rodolph and Guelf were unarmed. Rodolph folded his arms and tried to give the look of a man unafraid.

Guelf wasn't thinking of the woman's size, nor of what she represented. "Beautiful!" raced through his mind. "With a beauty which hurts like a sharp, twisting blade."

The woman's dark eyes stopped on Guelf. "Thank you," she said pleasantly. A shiver ran through Guelf, and he had no time to wonder at her knowledge of his own tongue.

Now the woman looked at Danold. She rested an elbow on a knee, cupping her chin. "Little man?" she asked softly, "why did you try to destroy the *Avol*—my ship?"

"You are my enemy," Danold answered. "You fired on Galactic Service ships. You destroyed the *Perseid* and its crew. It was my duty to try and down you."

"Your Galactic Service attacked first. When I fled to hyper space they followed. When I emerged, they were on all sides. I had no quarrel with them."

"What do you want?" Danold said harshly. "This is *our* Galaxy. It—"

"Little men from one planet? And you claim a Galaxy?"

Danold nodded, looked stubborn. "You've got us," he admitted. "But somehow, some time, we'll destroy you. Unless," he added, "you recognize our authority and confess your trespassing."

The woman regarded Danold and there was a look of sadness in her beautiful eyes. "In your minds you call me a Titan," she mused. "Perhaps I am. But I am not a race, such as you assume. I am not disputing space with any life form. The *Avol* is mine and I have a mission, little men. If your Galactic Service forbids my traveling where I choose, I am sorry. But nothing your race can do shall stop me."

Danold reached for his guns. Rodolph and Guelf acted as one to stop him. But Danold fired straight at the heart of the woman before they could reach him.

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Nothing happened. That is, nothing happened to the woman —but Danold vanished!

"And you," the woman addressed Captain Rodolph, "*you* had a different reason for intercepting me."

"I am a soldier," Rodolph answered. "I think you know my reason—I was on no mission of destruction."

"Only if your trinogen gun could have matched my weapons," she said drily. "But you withheld your 'destruction' until you were sure. Your Markab is undamaged, Captain Rodolph. It will carry you back to your home port. And you will find your impetuous gunner in his quarters.

"Tell your Galactic Service superiors that I am called Shellon," she added. "When I have completed my mission I shall probably never revisit your Galaxy . . . You may go, Captain Rodolph."

Rodolph turned and strode to the runway. "Come on Rik," he called.

"Rik Guelf stays," the woman said.

Rodolph turned, said, "He's not like Danold. He—"

"I mean no harm to your friend, Captain. I merely wish to talk with him alone." She smiled slightly.

From nowhere a row of squat robots materialized. Gently they thrust Rodolph onto the runway. "Rik," he called, "I won't leave till she turns you loose. They'll have to kill me to make me go without you . . ."

Rik somehow had no fear at all, but this emotional display from Rodolph was warming.

"Thanks, Rodolph," he said. "But I am not afraid. I feel sure no harm will come to me." He turned back to the fascinating creature on the throne-like chair.

Rigellians were life-forms, no larger than Earthmen. Vegans were smaller. But this Titan—she was amazing.

Rik Guelf waited. He felt no anger, no sense of antagonism. Rather, he had a sense of relief now that he faced her.

The riddle of Space beyond the perimeter of the Galaxy was beyond his comprehension. But somehow Rik Guelf knew he stood before a Being, not an Enemy.

"I know the question in your mind," the woman who called herself Shallon said softly. "You wish news of Eiler Guelf, your father."

Rik Guelf nodded, feeling excited, trying not to show his feelings.

"He is well, and with his command. His *Perseid* I had to destroy. But I built your father another ship." She smiled. "He is placed with his new craft and his new assignment."

He stared at her, amazement filling him now.

"Where is he? And what is his

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new assignment? Why did he desert Galactic?"

Shellon considered his questions. There was a faraway look in her eyes. Finally she said, "He is so far away that your hyper space drive cannot reach him. He is beyond the reach of Galactic Service."

Anger gripped Rik suddenly. "He took the oath to serve Galactic unto death. And my father is no deserter."

Shellon regarded him thoughtfully. "Your mind tells me that Eiler Guelf was your hero, and after your mother died both of you were lonely. Would it hurt if I told you he has mated with a woman of my race, that he is now a Titan?"

Rik gasped. It was incredible. Yet Eiler Guelf had believed in such a race as the Titans. Wherever spacemen met, sooner or later talk of a giant race would crop up. But until the crystal ship had appeared, there had been no real evidence of such a race. Unless they were Vegans, Rigellians. "How could my father become a Titan?" he said.

"Between your world and ours there stands a barrier," she explained. "Where the Markab is docked there is a barrier which is within my touch, but is your dimension. This side of the barrier, where I am sitting is our dimension—what you call 'Titan' world.

"Eiler Guelf," she added, "decided to come through that barrier. It was his own choice."

Rik felt like sitting down. He felt confused. Why should the woman alter the truth? "Why—what do you want of men like my father? Of Earthmen?"

She rose to her feet deliberately. The white robe, gossamer despite its tremendous width and length, fell from her shoulders. As the mass of sheen dropped to the floor the woman let her hair down, a golden, shimmering screen about her white body. And as Rik Guelf watched a great trembling seized him and he sank weakly to the floor. . . .

A dream is without substance, incoherent in pattern. Rik Guelf knew this was no dream, but he felt as helpless now as he would have been in a dream as there came to him a vision . . .

A great city, stretching to infinity, grew from the space behind the woman. There were towers of many hues, all connected by runways. There were peaks in the distance, and on either side of a vast plain. He saw a stretch of green water. And above it the sky was also green.

From a copper disk above the city came light. It was a mammoth sun but without the hot intensity of Rik's home sun. This was the home of the Titans . . .

There were ships on the water, air vehicles, land machines, people in loose, thin clothing. There was verdure, trees, flowers in gardens

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surrounding the entire city . . .

And the woman was talking to him, through the vision. It was her home; this city. It had the same name as her ship—*Avol.* And Avol was the center of Titan culture, with schools, technical institutes, great temples of learning . . .

And no military organization of any kind.

There was no war here for struggle between the life forms was not necessary. Only from the archives did they know of war.

The Titans interfered with no one. When they traveled outside their galaxy, they were prepared to defend themselves, but they did not desire conflict. And only space police kept the vigil . . .

Shellon was telling him this mentally and Rik understood . . .

For a thousand years there had been a pattern of slowing up in the Titans' Time-stream. The women remained unchanged. But in comparisons-of-ability charts which were kept for every individual, the near retrogression of males was discovered.

Titan males were healthy and amiable—but with less and less driving force. And as the male drive lessened drastically, a picked group of women left Avol in search of males with the forceful characteristics Titans must regain to stop their drift backwards. Shellon was one of those women . . .

She had left her dimension to seek such a male, but after a century of fruitless search—for the life-form to which Titan and Earthmen belonged, was rare, as Rik's galaxy already had learned—she was returning to Titan when they had met the *Perseid.*

"Six men," Shellon said to Rik Guelf, "were aboard the *Perseid.* My friend, Berna, was with me when we found her helpless, her piles miniature suns. And of the six aboard, only Eiler Guelf was alive."

Rik felt a sudden release from the force which had rendered him so weak. Now he stood erect again. And Shellon was seated again, the robe drawn over her shoulders once more. "The atomic piles of the *Perseid's* drive had overheated. There was no chance to jettison them before the lifeboats fused to their compartments. We had great difficulty in rescuing your father. He was seriously injured.

"When we knew that we should not be able to treat your father there, we turned our ship back to Avol." She paused. "Here we had to change him to our dimension to treat him. When he recovered, he chose to stay a Titan."

Shellon smiled. "It could be that Berna was the influence that caused him to make that decision. But aside from that, Eiler Guelf is doing many things he had longed to do in your Galaxy but was never able to do. Creative

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things. Titans respect men who create, who add to the betterment of others. Such creativeness is encouraged here.

"We live in peace on Titan and Titans do not have any urge to ruthlessness of any sort. And our span of life is ten thousand years."

Now she paused. Rik Guelf was trembling.

"If I become a Titan . . ." raced through his mind. Then he thought of Galactic Service and his years with it, of the years spent preparing for the service, of men who had spent their lives serving it.

He had never seen Earth, but many of the men he had served with had been demoted at the whim of some sector director or other political bigwig down there on Earth. There was outlawry aplenty there, they knew. And the Galaxy Service had the job of fighting Earth's battles—some of them battles against organized outlaws. And the outlaws were renegade Earthmen.

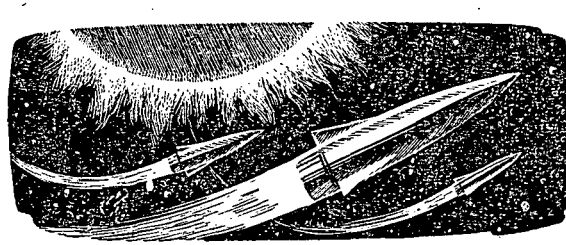
Space men talked of the good old days, when their forefathers met other life-forms in the Galaxy. There was the showdown with Vegans, which lasted five centuries. Galactic Service had to have sporadic conflicts, skirmishes if not battles, in order to expand. Always the service was expanding. The trinogen gun was developed for colonizing expeditions in hundreds of sectors where life-forms had outgunned Galactic Service in the past.

"I should like to live the sort of life my father chose," Rik said abruptly. "Is it possible for me to become a Titan, too?"

Shellon smiled. "You must first tell your Captain Rodolph of your decision." She was studying him, her eyes bright now. "After that," she added, "I shall be waiting for you at the barrier—here."

"You know why I want to be a Titan?" Rik asked slowly.

"Hurry," she said softly, "and tell Rodolph." Her cheeks were flushed, her face alive. "Yes, I know. I know, darling—"



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short in the chest

by . . . Idris Seabright

It did seem that the three arms of the military service ought to get together. So, being a Marine, she tried not to hate the Army!

THE GIRL IN the Marine-green uniform turned up her hearing aid a trifle—they were all a little deaf, from the cold-war bombing—and with an earnest frown regarded the huxley that was seated across the desk from her.

"You're the queerest huxley I ever heard of," she said flatly. "The others aren't at all like you."

The huxley did not seem displeased at this remark. It took off its window-pane glasses, blew on them, polished them on a handkerchief, and returned them to its nose. Sonya's turning up the hearing aid having activated the short in its chest again, it folded its hands protectively over the top buttons of its dove-gray brocaded waistcoat.

"And in what way, my dear young lady, am I different from other huxleys?" it asked.

"Well—you requested me to speak to you frankly, to tell you exactly what is in my mind. I've only been to a huxley once before, but it kept talking about giving

When this story appeared on our desk in somewhat miraculous fashion, on a gray day in January, we brightened almost instantly, and had a desire to cheer. Only one thing troubled us—the word "Dight." We weren't quite sure what it meant. But now Idris Seabright has enlightened us, and all is well. "Dight," she writes, "is an old English word meaning 'to have intercourse with.' See POETS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, *Auden & Pearson, Vol. 1, page 173. The word was re-introduced by a late-20th-century philologist who disliked the 'sleep with' euphemism, and it soon became popular."*

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me the big, over-all picture, and about using dighting to transcend myself. It spoke about in-group love, and inter-group harmony, and it said our basic loyalty must be given to Defense, which in the cold war emergency is the country itself.

"You're not like that at all, not at all philosophic. I suppose that's why they're called huxleys—because they're philosophic rob—I beg your pardon."

"Go ahead and say it," the huxley encouraged. "I'm not shy. I don't mind being called a robot."

"I might have known. I guess that's why you're so popular. I never saw a huxley with so many people in its waiting room."

"I *am* a rather unusual robot," the huxley said, with a touch of smugness. "I'm a new model, just past the experimental stage, with unusually complicated relays. But that's beside the point. You haven't told me yet what's troubling you."

The girl fiddled nervously with the control of her hearing aid. After a moment she turned it down and the almost audible sputtering in the huxley's chest died away.

"It's about the pigs," she said.

"The pigs!" The huxley was jarred out of its mechanical calm. "You know, I thought it would be something about dighting," it said after a second. It smiled winningly. "It usually is."

"Well . . . it's about that too. But the pigs were what started me worrying. I don't know whether you're clear about my rank. I'm Major Sonya Briggs, in charge of the Zone 13 piggery."

"Oh," said the huxley.

"Yes . . . Like the other armed services, we Marines produce all our own food. My piggery is a pretty important unit in the job of keeping up the supply of pork chops. Naturally, I was disturbed when the new-born pigs refused to nurse.

"If you're a new robot, you won't have much on your memory coils about pigs. As soon as the pigs are born, we take them away from the sow—we use an aseptic scoop—and put them in an enclosure of their own with a big nursing tank. We have a recording of a sow grunting, and when they hear that they're supposed to nurse. The sow gets an oestric, and after a few days she's ready to breed again. The system is supposed to produce a lot more pork than letting the baby pigs stay with the sow in the old-fashioned way. But as I say, lately they've been refusing to nurse.

"No matter how much we step up the grunting record, they won't take the bottle. We've had to slaughter several litters rather than let them starve to death. And at that the flesh hasn't been much good—too mushy and soft. As you can easily see, the situation is getting serious."

"Um," the huxley said.

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"Naturally, I made full reports. Nobody has known what to do. But when I got my dighting slip a couple of times ago, in the space marked 'Purpose,' besides the usual rubber-stamped 'To reduce inter-service tension' somebody had written in: 'To find out from Air their solution of the neonatal pig nutrition problem.'

"So I knew my dighting opposite number in Air was not only supposed to reduce inter-group tension, but also I was supposed to find out from him how Air got its new-born pigs to eat." She looked down, fidgeting with the clasp of her musette bag.

"Go on," said the huxley with a touch of severity. "I can't help you unless you give me your full confidence."

"Is it true that the dighting system was set up by a group of psychologists after they'd made a survey of inter-service tension? After they'd found that Marine was feuding with Air, and Air with Infantry, and Infantry with Navy, to such an extent that it was cutting down over-all Defense efficiency? They thought that sex relations would be the best of all ways of cutting down hostility and replacing it with friendly feelings, so they started the dighting plan?"

"You know the answers to those questions as well as I do," the huxley replied frostily. "The tone of your voice when you asked them shows that they are to be answered with 'Yes.' You're stalling, Major Briggs." It said.

"It's so unpleasant . . . What do you want me to tell you?"

"Go on in detail with what happened after you got your blue dighting slip."

She shot a glance at him, flushed, looked away again, and began talking rapidly. "The slip was for next Tuesday. I hate Air for dighting, but I thought it would be all right. You know how it is—there's a particular sort of kick in feeling oneself change from a cold sort of loathing into being eager and excited and in love with it. After one's had one's Watson, I mean.

"I went to the neutral area Tuesday afternoon. He was in the room when I got there, sitting in a chair with his big feet spread out in front of him, wearing one of those loathsome leather jackets. He stood up politely when he saw me, but I knew he'd just about as soon cut my throat as look at me, since I was Marine. We were both armed, naturally."

"What did he look like?" the huxley broke in.

"I really didn't notice. Just that he was Air. Well, anyway, we had a drink together. I've heard they put cannabis in the drinks they serve you in the neutral areas, and it might be true. I didn't feel nearly so hostile to him after I'd finished my drink. I even managed to smile, and he managed to smile back. He said, 'We might as well get started,

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don't you think?' So I went in the head.

"I took off my things and left my gun on the bench beside the wash basin. I gave myself my Watson in the thigh."

"The usual Watson?" the huxley asked as she halted. "Oestric and anti-concipient injected sub-cutaneously from a sterile ampoule?"

"Yes. He'd had his Watson too, the priapic, because when I got back. . . ." She began to cry.

"What happened after you got back?" the huxley queried after she had cried for a while.

"I just wasn't any good. No good at all. The Watson might have been so much water for all the effect it had. Finally he got sore. He said, 'What's the matter with you? I might have known anything Marine was in would get loused up.'

"That made me angry, but I was too upset to defend myself. 'Tension reduction!' he said. 'This is a fine way to promote inter-service harmony. I'm not only not going to sign the checking out sheet, I'm going to file a complaint against you to your group.'"

"Oh, my," said the huxley.

"Yes, wasn't it terrible? I said, 'If you file a complaint, I'll file a counter-charge. You didn't reduce *my* tension, either.'

"We argued about it for a while. He said that if I filed counter-charges there'd be a trial and I'd have to take pentathol and then the truth would come out. He said it wasn't his fault; he'd been ready.

"I knew that was true, so I began to plead with him. I reminded him of the cold war, and how the enemy were about to take Venus, when all we had was Mars. I talked to him about loyalty to Defense, and I asked him how he'd feel if he was kicked out of Air. And finally, after what seemed like hours, he said he wouldn't file charges. I guess he felt sorry for me. He even agreed to sign the checking out sheet.

"That was that. I went back to the head and put on my clothes and we both went out. We left the room at different times, though, because we were too angry to smile at each other and look happy. Even as it was, I think some of the neutral area personnel suspected us."

"Is that what's been worrying you?" the huxley asked when she seemed to have finished.

"Well . . . I can trust you, can't I? You really won't tell?"

"Certainly I won't. Anything told to a huxley is a privileged communication. The first amendment applies to us, if to no other profession."

"Yes. I remember there was a supreme court decision about freedom of speech. . . ." She swallowed, choked, and swallowed again. "When I got my next

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dighting slip," she said bravely, "I was so upset I applied for a gyn. I hoped the doctor would say there was something physically wrong with me, but he said I was in swell shape. He said, 'A girl like you ought to be mighty good at keeping inter-service tension down.' So there wasn't any help there.

"Then I went to a huxley, the huxley I was telling you about. It talked philosophy to me. That wasn't any help either. So—finally—well, I stole an extra Watson from the lab."

There was a silence. When she saw that the huxley seemed to have digested her revelation without undue strain, she went on, "I mean, an extra Watson beyond the one I was issued. I couldn't endure the thought of going through another dight like the one before. There was quite a fuss about the ampoule's being missing. The dighting drugs are under strict control. But they never did find out who'd taken it."

"And did it help you? The double portion of oestric?" the huxley asked. It was prodding at the top buttons of its waistcoat with one forefinger, rather in the manner of one who is not quite certain he feels an itch.

"Yes, it did. Everything went off well. He—the man—said I was a nice girl, and Marine was a good service, next to Infantry, of course. He was Infantry. I had a fine time myself, and last week when I got a request sheet from Infantry asking for some pig pedigrees, I went ahead and initialled it. That tension reduction does work. I've been feeling awfully jittery, though. And yesterday I got another blue dighting slip.

"What am I to do? I can't steal another Watson. They've tightened up the controls. And even if I could, I don't think one extra would be enough. This time I think it would take *two*."

She put her head down on the arm of her chair, gulping desperately.

"You don't think you'd be all right with just one Watson?" the huxley asked after an interval. "After all, people used to dight habitually without any Watsons at all."

"That wasn't inter-service dighting. No, I don't think I'd be all right. You see, this time it's with Air again. I'm supposed to try to find out about porcine nutrition. And I've always particularly hated Air."

She twisted nervously at the control of her hearing aid. The huxley gave a slight jump. "Ah—well, of course you might resign," it said in a barely audible voice.

Sonya—in the course of a long-continued struggle there is always a good deal of cultural contamination, and if there were girls named Sonya, Olga, and Tatiana in Defense, there were girls named Shirley and Mary Beth to be found on the enemy's side—Sonya

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gave him an incredulous glance. "You must be joking. I think it's in very poor taste. I didn't tell you my difficulties for you to make fun of me."

The huxley appeared to realize that it had gone too far. "Not at all, my dear young lady," it said placatingly. It pressed its hands to its bosom. "Just a suggestion. As you say, it was in poor taste. I should have realized that you'd rather die than not be Marine."

"Yes, I would."

She turned the hearing aid down again. The huxley relaxed. "You may not be aware of it, but difficulties like yours are not entirely unknown," it said. "Perhaps, after a long course of oestrics, antibodies are built up. Given a state of initial physiological reluctance, a forced sexual response might . . . But you're not interested in all that. You want help. How about taking your troubles to somebody higher? Taking them all the way up?"

"You mean—the CO?"

The huxley nodded.

Major Briggs' face flushed scarlet. "I can't do that! I just can't! No nice girl would. I'd be too ashamed." She beat on her musette bag with one hand, and began to sob—wildly, uncontrollably for a moment.

Finally she sat up. The huxley was regarding her patiently. She opened her bag, got out cosmetics and mirror, and began to repair emotion's ravages. Then she extracted an electronically-powered vibro-needle from the depths of her bag and began crafting away on some indeterminate white garment.

"I don't know what I'd do without my crafting," she said in explanation. "These last few days, it's all that's kept me sane. Thank goodness it's fashionable to do crafting now. Well. I've told you all about my troubles. Have you any ideas?"

The huxley regarded her with faintly-protruding eyes. The vibro-needle clicked away steadily, so steadily that Sonya was quite unaware of the augmented popping in the huxley's chest. Besides, the noise was of a frequency that her hearing aid didn't pick up any too well.

The huxley cleared its throat. "Are you sure your dighting difficulties are really your fault?" it asked in an oddly altered voice.

"Why—I suppose so. After all, there's been nothing wrong with the men either time." Major Briggs did not look up from her work.

"Yes, physiologically. But let's put it this way. And I want you to remember, my dear young lady, that we're both mature, sophisticated individuals, and that I'm a huxley, after all. Supposing your dighting date had been with . . . somebody in . . . Marine. Would you have had any difficulty with it?"

Sonya Briggs put down her

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crafting, her cheeks flaming. "With a group brother? You have no right to talk to me like that!"

"Now, now. You must be calm."

The sputtering in the huxley's chest was by now so loud that only Sonya's emotion could have made her deaf to it. It was also so well-established that even her laying down the vibro-needle had had no effect on it.

"Don't be offended," the huxley went on in its unnatural voice. "I was only putting a completely hypothetical case."

"Then . . . supposing it's understood that it's completely hypothetical and I would never, never dream of doing a thing like that . . . then, I don't suppose I'd have had any trouble with it." She picked up the needle once more.

"In other words, it's not your fault. Look at it this way. You're Marine."

"Yes." The girl's head went up proudly. "I'm Marine."

"Yes. And that means you're a hundred times—a thousand times—better than any of these twerps you've been having to dight with. Isn't that true? Just in the nature of things. Because you're Marine."

"Why—I guess it is. I never thought of it before like that."

"But you can see it's true now, when you think of it. Take that date you had with the man from Air. How could it be your fault that you couldn't respond to him, somebody from *Air?* Why, it was his fault—it's as plain as the nose on your face—*his* fault for being from a repulsive service like Air!"

Sonya was looking at the huxley with parted lips and shining eyes. "I never thought of it before," she breathed. "But its true. You're right. You're wonderfully, wonderfully right!"

"Of course I am," said the huxley smugly. "I was built to be right. Now, let's consider this matter of your next date."

"Yes, let's."

"You'll go to the neutral area, as usual. You'll be wearing your miniBAR won't you?"

"Yes, of course. We always go in armed."

"Good. You'll go to the head and undress. You'll give yourself your Watson. If it works—"

"It won't. I'm almost sure of that."

"Hear me out. As I was saying, if it works, you'll dight. If it doesn't you'll be carrying your miniBAR."

"Where?" asked Sonya, frowning.

"Behind your back. You want to give him a chance. But not too good a chance. If the Watson doesn't work—" the huxley paused for dramatic effect—" *"get out your gun and shoot him. Shoot him through the heart.* Leave him lying up against a bulkhead. Why should you go through a painful scene like the

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one you just described for the sake of a yuk from Air?"

"Yes—but—" Sonya had the manner of one who, while striving to be reasonable, is none too sure that reasonableness can be justified. "That wouldn't reduce inter-service tension effectively."

"My dear young lady, why should inter-service tension be reduced at the expense of Marine? Besides, you've got to take the big, over-all view. Whatever benefits Marine, benefits Defense."

"Yes . . . That's true . . . I think you've given me good advice."

"Of course I have! One thing more. After you shoot him, leave a note with your name, sector, and identity number on it. You're not ashamed of it."

"No . . . No . . . But I just remembered. How can he give me the pig formula when he's dead?"

"He's just as likely to give it to you dead as he was when he was alive. Besides, think of the humiliation of it. You, Marine, having to lower yourself to wheedle a thing like that out of Air! Why, he ought to be proud, honored, to give the formula to you."

"Yes, he ought." Sonya's lips tightened. "I won't take any nonsense from him," she said. "Even if the Watson works and I dight him, I'll shoot him afterwards. Wouldn't you?"

"Of course. Any girl with spirit would."

Major Briggs glanced at her watch. "Twenty past! I'm overdue at the piggery right now. Thank you so much." She beamed at him. "I'm going to take your advice."

"I'm glad. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She walked out of the room, humming, "From the halls of Montezuma . . ."

Left alone, the huxley interchanged its eyes and nose absently a couple of times. It looked up at the ceiling speculatively, as if it wondered when the bombs from Air, Infantry, and Navy were going to come crashing down. It had had interviews with twelve young women so far, and it had given them all the same advice it had given Major Briggs. Even a huxley with a short in its chest might have foreseen that the final result of its counselling would be catastrophic for Marine.

It sat a little while longer, repeating to itself, "Poppoff, Poppoff. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism."

Its short was sputtering loudly. Even though its derangement had reached a point that was not far short of insanity, the huxley still retained a certain cunning.

Once more it repeated, "Poppoff Poppoff," to itself. Then it went to the door of its waiting room and called in its next client.

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mr. caxton draws a martian bird

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

Peter was just a trusting, eager child. What could he know about life on Mars? Surely Mr. Caxton had every right to die laughing!

MR. CAXTON was such an impatient, ill-tempered man it was surprising that the children cared to talk to him at all. It was even more surprising that the parents of Peter and Susan Ashley should have gone exploring in the trackless Martian desert, and left Mr. Caxton in charge.

Peter was ten, and Susan was eight, and even on Earth the Mr. Caxtons of this world make very poor companions for the young.

It was true, of course, that Mr. Caxton was skillful with skillets, and knew how to build and bank fires with great precision, and economy of effort. But surely some kindlier guardian could have been found for Peter and Susan, some guardian less harsh, self-centered, and downright mean.

In the rust-red desert camps were gruff, friendly, grizzled-bearded men who would have taken delight in dangling both children on their knees. In the camps were men who would have said: "Hello, Susan! Hello, Tommy! Isn't it a grand day for hiking? What's that? You saw a

Some two years ago a dramatized version of Frank Belknap Long's story, GUEST IN THE HOUSE *was presented on the CBS TV "Out There" program. It dealt in fascinating fashion with two precocious children who turned the tables on a sinister man from a chill, far distant future. Mr. Long's children are now back again, bearing different names and personalities, of course, but with their table-turning propensities still at white heat.*

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clawmark in the sand? Four-toed? Well now—suppose we go, and have a look."

"But we really saw it, Mr. Caxton!" Peter insisted. "We're not making it up. Honest we're not."

"Sit down, don't annoy me!" Mr. Caxton said, throwing another log on the fire. "If you say another word I'll take you across my knee, and drum some sober sense into you!"

Tommy winced, and recoiled in alarm. But Susan could run, hop or skip a rope, and still know when an adult was bluffing.

"You wouldn't dare spank Peter," she said.

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

Mr. Caxton arose from his crouching position by the fire, and eyed Susan angrily. "You're a very little girl to talk so big," he sneered. "Let me tell you something. To me you're a woman already—a woman in embryo. I can see you twenty years from now, nagging the life out of a man. If I sent you off to bed without your supper I'd be doing your future husband a favor."

"Just try shutting Peter and me up in the dark again!" Susan warned. "Just try—and see what happens!"

Mr. Caxton bent, and picked up a thin reed switch. He flourished it threateningly.

"Go away," he growled. "Get out of my sight. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Come on," Peter urged, tugging at his sister's sleeve. "If he hits me you'll start crying."

"I won't, Peter. I'll show him."

"I'd rather take a whipping than see you cry. Do you want me to take a whipping?"

"No, Peter."

"Then let's go."

Peter and Susan turned, and went racing across the hot red sand to the prefabricated metal shack which they shared with their parents when Martian archeology wasn't waging relentless warfare on the domestic instincts of Dr. Kenneth Ashley, and his gifted, scholarly wife.

"Just wait until papa gets back!" Susan whispered, stopping to loosen her oxygen mask at the door of the shack. "Papa doesn't know how mean Mr. Caxton gets when he's been drinking."

"He doesn't have to drink to be mean," Peter reminded her. "Next time we go exploring I'll play dumb."

Peter's voice came out thin, and muffled through his oxygen mask. But there was a ring of angry defiance in it. "He doesn't know how an explorer feels anyway. He's awfully educated, but Mr. Walgreen says you can't just pop knowledge into your mouth like a pill, and swallow it."

Self-portrait of Peter. A boy with shining eyes, and curly dark hair who loves knowledge for its own sake. Knowledge and a lot of other things, eh, Peter? The

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wind ruffling the tumbled dunes, the bone-white summits of the buried Martian cities, and, just for good measure, the dawn with its banners of fire.

Why shouldn't an eager, inquiring boy of ten see a few strange clawmarks in the sand? What right had Mr. Caxton or anyone else to disillusion and shake the faith of a budding explorer in the strange, the incredible?

Without mystery adventuring would quickly lose its zest, and science would just as quickly lose its Peters. Could science afford such a loss?

Susan appeared to think so. She almost pulled Peter into the shack, and forced him to sit down in the middle of the floor.

"You talk too much, Peter," she said.

Buried somewhere in the myths and legends of childhood there is reputed to be a magical box which at one time contained, incredibly folded and shrunken, all of the animals that ever were.

Small on the outside, large within. The shack wasn't magical, but it did seem to swallow up and shrink the children in much the same fashion. Little white ghosts they might have seemed to a not too observant eavesdropper, sitting side by side in the middle of the floor.

Above them arched a shining roof of crystal clear quartz, and they had only to raise their eyes to see the Martian sky, cold, cloudless and eerily remote.

"I don't hate Mr. Caxton," Peter said. "I just feel sorry for him."

"Mr. Caxton thinks I'm hungry, but I'm not," Susan said. "I don't want any supper. He'll be madder than ever when he finds out we've gone to sleep without giving him a chance to punish us."

Susan fell silent, leaning her head against her brother's shoulder.

On Mars the night does not creep treacherously over the desert amidst clusters of lengthening shadows. It sweeps down on pinions of pulsating blackness, with hardly a glimmer of twilight to herald its coming.

Susan was the first to drowse off. Peter watched her for a moment, inwardly congratulating himself on his superior reserves of strength.

It seemed tragic to him that his sister had been born a girl. She was terribly clever, of course, even at play. But she never woke up planning a full day of exploring, never wanted to lie awake in the darkness dreaming of campfires in the desert, and the echoing tramp of strange beasts going on and on in the blackness like a peal of thunder, now loud and terrifying, and now muffled, but never quite dying out.

She was content to play hopscotch with the other children,

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build doll houses out of the soft red mud that lined the canal beds, and get sticky smears of jam on her cheeks.

It was perhaps fortunate for Peter that his sister could not tune in on his thoughts. Before falling asleep he sometimes experienced moments of twilight meditation when his mind became crystal clear, its memory-conjured visions flooded with the nightmare brilliance of an actual dream.

Now, suddenly, he saw the strange clawmarks again, four-toed, and pointing in the direction of the camp. Why hadn't Mr. Caxton believed him? He asked the question without realizing that sleep was already hovering over him, with a black curtain of oblivion to impose silence on his thoughts.

Whether Peter slept five minutes or five hours would not have in any way altered the depth and completeness of that sudden falling away of consciousness. It was therefore of no importance.

Only Peter's terror on awakening was important. It was a terror so cruelly sharp, sudden and overwhelming that it brought him to his knees with a scream. No sooner was he on his knees than he began to shake, to clutch at his sister's arm in a sort of boyish agony, as if the panic he felt was being made worse by her refusal to awake, and share it with him.

It was not a brave way to act at all. Despite his terrible fear of being alone he should have controlled himself, he should have tried to protect and spare his sister. He realized that almost instantly, with the coldness still coursing up his spine.

But he was afraid to keep silent lest the thing he saw should come out of the night toward him.

He could see it very clearly. It was framed in the doorway, and it was staring straight at him, its owlish face half in shadows. He could see its narrowly slitted eyes burning brightly, and the wicked gleam of its teeth as its feathered jaws opened and closed.

It was watching him and listening, and he knew that at any moment it might decide to come into the shack, and kill him. It hates me, he thought. Hates me, *hates me*.

Yes, Peter, it's bad. When people you don't like come to visit you you can lock the door, and hide. But you can't hide from a shadow on the floor, the dreadful rustle and flutter of dark wings unfolding.

Peter could have refused to believe that the thing was actually standing in the doorway—a tall, fearful, blood-taloned thing as real as the pounding of his heart. He could have fled into a hidden corner of himself, shutting his eyes tight, and knotting up his fists until the clutch of its cold talons brought a

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horribly agonizing awakening.

But when Susan awoke, and saw it too every avenue of escape was blocked to him. Susan didn't scream. Her breath came in a sharp gasp, but her self-control was extraordinary.

"Peter," she whispered. "Turn on the lights. The light will scare it away."

Peter's heart leapt with sudden hope. But when he tried to move his knees came together, and his muscles tightened up.

"I'll do it, Peter," Susan said.

He heard her getting to her feet, and panic struck at him again. The light switch was close to the door, and for one awful moment Peter had a sickening vision of Susan being snatched away into the darkness forever, her eyes turned upon him in agonized reproach.

Peter half stumbled, half dragged himself to the light switch. He got ahead of Susan and pushed her back, becoming all at once the recognized leader of an indomitable band of desert-roaming men, scornful of ferocious beasts, and with little thought to spare for his own safety.

The light came on in a sudden, blinding flare.

"I won't let it catch you, Susan!" Peter cried. "If it catches me run for help!"

With that, Peter leapt back and stared wildly.

The doorway was a square of inky blackness, and there was nothing to be seen beyond it. If lights could kill lights had killed—or convulsed the creature with such instant, overwhelming terror that it had vanished without a sound.

It had vanished so completely that it was remarkably easy for Peter to persuade himself that he had acted bravely from the instant of his awakening.

Lest censure bear too heavily upon him, it should be remembered that even a lion makes haste to hide itself in the impenetrable depths of the forest when alarmed by an unfamiliar scent, or a shadow not quite to its liking.

"Now Mr. Caxton will have to believe me, Susan," Peter said. "Did you see its claws? Two in front and two in back."

Susan said nothing. She stood staring into the darkness at Peter's side, and although there was nothing to be seen there was a great deal to be heard.

Somewhere in the darkness Mr. Caxton was shouting. That did not surprise Susan. Mr. Caxton had no control at all over his anger. The instant he became annoyed he raised his voice, and when he became really furious his shouts could be deafening.

There is a coarseness of speech which strains the credulity of children. Their innocence is spared because adult anger is quite unlike the brief, quickly-aroused belligerency which results in

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blackened eyes, and bruised knuckles.

Listening, Peter and Susan both knew that Mr. Caxton's anger was a thing peculiar to himself. It could only have been brought forth piping hot from the kindling of great, smouldering fires deep inside him.

He could be heard shouting and cursing in the darkness for a full minute before he came striding into the shack.

"You little devils!" he shouted. "Next time you scream like that you'll wish you hadn't. Oh, how you'll wish you hadn't! How can a man get any rest when he can't hear himself think?"

"It wasn't me," Susan said. "It was Peter. If you saw what we saw you'd scream too, Mr. Caxton."

"Now wait a minute," Mr. Caxton said. "Stop right there. Before I listen to any of that you may as well know that screaming is a luxury you can't afford."

Susan refused to wait. "Peter saw what it was made the clawmarks," she said, defiantly. "I saw it too."

Mr. Caxton stood very still, looking at her. "Likely enough," he said, with derisive malice. "The clawmarks couldn't just stand alone. You have to work over a gnat to make it bring forth a mountain."

"It's true, Mr. Caxton," Peter corroborated. "We both saw it. It was all covered with feathers."

"One moment, boy!" Mr. Caxton rasped. "Exactly where was it standing when you saw it?"

"In the doorway," Peter said.

"In the doorway. How interesting. There's no animal life at all on Mars. But *you* saw a bird. How tall was it, boy?"

"Much taller than you are, Mr. Caxton!" Susan said, quickly.

Mr. Caxton bent, and gripped Peter's arm. "I asked Peter," he said, shaking him. "Speak up, boy. Is there something wrong with your tongue?"

"It was big, Mr. Caxton," Tommy managed. "It had four toes. Two in front, and two in back."

"And a long, curving bill, I suppose."

"I don't know, Mr. Caxton."

"You've seen pictures of birds —Earth birds. Did you ever see a bird without a bill?"

"No, Mr. Caxton. But it was dark. It just stood in the door, and looked at me."

In the human mind deliberate, calculated cruelty can wear many masks. Its range is infinite, its devious twistings and turnings often subtle beyond belief.

Mr. Caxton could have slapped Peter's face, or so terrified him by shaking him that he would have thrown himself down, and given way to a wild, uncontrollable fit of sobbing.

But Mr. Caxton had a better, and far more sagacious idea. The boy fancies himself an explorer.

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Teach him a lesson he'll never forget. Prove to him that his knowledge of the natural sciences would disgrace a four-year-old—no, an infant in swaddling clothes.

"All right, Peter," Mr. Caxton said. "Suppose we take a look at the planet Mars. It's the planet of your birth, remember. A boy with real intelligence should know a great deal about the planet of his birth, shouldn't he?"

Peter gulped and stared, knowing that Mr. Caxton did not really expect an answer.

"Peter," Mr. Caxton went on. "The first space rocket reached Mars in nineteen ninety-seven. This is the year twenty fifty-three. Fifty years is a long time, Peter. In all those years no man or *boy* has ever seen a Martian animal.

"Do you know why, Peter?" Mr. Caxton gave Peter's arm a slight wrench. "I'll tell you why. A man requires so much gaseous oxygen to support his life that he can't walk twenty yards on Mars without an oxygen mask. He'd drop dead if he tried to walk a mile. You can build fires if you bank them carefully, but a man needs more oxygen than a fire."

Mr. Caxton's eyes narrowed in malicious triumph. "No animal the size of man or larger could exist on Mars without some kind of natural oxygenating apparatus built into its body.

"A bird? Peter, I'm going to be completely honest with you. A certain kind of bird might just possibly be able to survive on Mars, but it would have to get along on very little oxygen."

With an effort Peter summoned the courage to interrupt Mr. Caxton with a quite unnecessary reminder. "It *was* a bird, Mr. Caxton. I told you it had feathers!"

"Yes indeed, Peter. It was a bird you saw. You say you saw a *huge* bird standing in the doorway. Do you realize what a perfect pit you have just dug for yourself? Do you know what a Martian bird would look like? Have you ever tried to imagine how a *real* scientist feels when he knows that he can't be wrong? Here, I'll show you!"

With his gaze fixed triumphantly on Tommy Mr. Caxton removed a small writing pad from his weather jacket, and proceeded to draw upon it. Mr. Caxton used an ordinary lead pencil, and that his skill as an artist was of no mean order could be seen almost instantly.

With a few deft strokes Mr. Caxton traced out on the smooth paper a shape of incredible lightness and grace, a shape so fragile, slender and spiraling that only a miracle of the glass-blower's art could have translated it into three-dimensional reality.

A veritable wonder bird it seemed, a creature of light and fire with a bill three times the length of its body.

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With skill in the arts there goes usually a certain gentleness, a generosity of spirit which shrinks from inflicting pain on others. But so closely was Mr. Caxton's skill linked to the cruelty in his nature that he always saw to it that it aroused in the beholder bitterness and despair.

Mr. Caxton did not ask Peter how he liked the drawing. Instead, he thrust it at him, twisting him about and forcing him to stare at it.

"A Martian bird would look like that," he said, with cold mockery in his stare. "Did the bird you claim to have seen look like that? Did it? Answer me!"

"No!" Susan cried.

"You keep out of it!" Mr. Caxton warned. "I'm waiting, Peter."

"No, it didn't," Peter said. "Pop wouldn't want me to say it did. He told me an explorer has to observe closely everything he sees."

"I thought so—your little liar!" Mr. Caxton's features hardened and his voice rang out accusingly. "You made the whole thing up."

It is doubtful if Mr. Caxton would have struck a child in spiteful rage. The grotesque melodrama of self-righteous deceit that went on inside of him would have been thrown out of joint by such a flagrant violation of adult mores. Besides, the danger of retribution from Peter's parents would have given him very serious and solemn pause.

What Mr. Caxton actually did was a far less grievous offense. He simply took the drawing and molded it carefully to Peter's face. Then, with a quick, abrupt shove, he sent Peter reeling backward.

Peter let out a yell, lost his balance, and went down on the floor on his hands and knees.

It was not a too grievous offense, but if Mr. Caxton had delivered a stinging blow to Peter's cheek with the flat of his hand he would have condemned himself less absolutely.

Some people can do a malicious thing once, but it doesn't mean that they are completely evil. Even the sternest type of old English schoolmaster had redeeming qualities, and a knuckle rapping with a ruler has been forgiven by irate parents time and time again.

But by blind-folding Peter and sending him reeling Mr. Caxton had placed himself beyond the pale. There is nothing quite as shocking and unforgivable as a blow to the pride of a sensitive boy with no malice in his nature, and to Peter's father, just coming in through the door, the affront seemed outrageous.

Peter's mother, too, turned white with rage. She stood for an instant swaying in the doorway, unnerved by the mind-numbing realization that she had returned just in time to rescue her children from the clutches of a

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monster. Then she made straight for Mr. Caxton.

She was a frail little woman, and it seemed strange that Mr. Caxton should have been more terrified by her unbridled fury than by the more immediate threat of Dr. Ashley himself, who was now towering directly over him.

Dr. Ashley's arm was drawn back, and his eyes were darting venom. But even when Dr. Ashley's fist crashed against Mr. Caxton's jaw with shattering violence Peter's discredited guardian took the blow unblinkingly, his eyes still on Mrs. Ashley's white and accusing face.

For a moment Mr. Caxton blacked out completely. He lay sprawled out on the floor at Dr. Ashley's feet, and the little ribbon of crimson which dribbled from his mouth might have been a vehicle for cruel satire if Mr. Caxton had been less firmly convinced that there was no animal life on Mars.

For it looked suspiciously like a worm, a blood-hued crawler of the Martian night that in its own tiny way symbolized the many branching tunnels of corruption and decay that could exist inside a man.

It was to Dr. Ashley's credit that he did not give Mr. Caxton a second glance when that very disheveled person got to his feet, and stared in sullen, despairing confusion at Peter picking himself up in sobbing defiance.

Dr. Ashley very deliberately allowed his anger to cool, his quick brown eyes flashing to Peter in radiant sympathy.

"It won't happen again, son," he promised.

"If it does, he'll wish he never was born," Mrs. Ashley agreed, staring at Mr. Caxton with a hate so cold and merciless it brought all of his terror back.

Perhaps buried somewhere deep in Mr. Caxton's mind was a childhood fear of punishment at the hands of a scolding woman. It could have explained why he trembled and turned pale, and went stumbling out of the shack without a backward glance.

It was of no great importance, and it would have been silly for Peter's parents to waste any sympathy on him.

They didn't.

Dr. Ashley went up to his son, and gripped him by the shoulder with all of the gentleness of a supremely wise parent with a bedrock of granitelike strength to draw upon.

"Never let malicious envy disturb you, son," he said. "If anyone hates you enough to push you around you can rest assured there's a secret envy gnawing away at him."

Seeing the puzzlement in Peter's eyes, Dr. Ashley smiled reassuringly. "Mr. Caxton has a complicated approach to everything. He'd like to see nature as

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you do, son—simply and clearly with a boy's shining vision. He never could, and that shriveled him up tragically."

"I really did see a bird, Pop. It stood in the doorway and—"

"We've neglected you shamefully, Tommy," Mrs. Ashley said. "We've gone poking around in buried cities without realizing that the Martians never had it so good. A living son and daughter are worth all of the archeological treasures on Earth. Why shouldn't they be worth even more on Mars?"

"Your mother's right," Dr. Ashley said. "It's a brave, new world, and there are so many shining roads ahead we'd be crazy not to go jogging along them together."

Mr. Caxton stood for a moment just outside the shack listening to the children's excited voices rejoicing in a reunion he was powerless to spoil.

He stood swaying and cursing, telling himself that he had been quite mad to let the Ashleys make him look like a fool.

Peter had lied about the bird, hadn't he? Deliberately made the whole thing up for the sole purpose of ruining his reputation as a kindly and tolerant man whose only fault was a certain severity of temper which he could not always control.

For a moment Mr. Caxton fingered his bruised jaw, and remembered with a shudder the look of quite unreasoning fury in Mrs. Ashley's eyes. Then he straightened his shoulders, shook his fist at the empty air, and started back toward his own shack.

Mr. Caxton did not get far.

At first all he saw was a weaving blur in the darkness a few yards ahead of him, and all he felt was a chill wind blowing up his spine. He thought for a moment that the blur was casting an actual shadow, and that terrifyingly in the darkness there had appeared for the barest instant the glitter and gleam of claws.

But that, of course, was nonsense. Having quickly persuaded himself that he was in no danger Mr. Caxton confidently increased his stride, and did not realize that he was in the presence of Peter's bird until it was breathing at his side.

Peter's Martian bird! The instant Mr. Caxton felt its breath fanning his cheeks on both sides of his oxygen mask he leapt back with a wild, despairing cry.

In the darkness the creature appeared much bigger than it actually was, and it was easy to see how two startled and imaginative children might have magnified its outlines, and misjudged its bulk.

Mr. Caxton was deceived very much as Peter had been.

Actually it was an incredibly slender and graceful bird, a creature of air and fire with a razor-sharp bill three times the

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length of its long, tapering body.

Unfortunately Mr. Caxton could not see the bill straighten out in the darkness, and he had no way of knowing that a bill that could curve down to pick up lichenous food from the sparse Martian desert could straighten out in an instant to bayonet a man.

"If you saw what Peter saw you'd scream too, Mr. Caxton," Susan had said.

Mr. Caxton saw what Peter saw, but when the bill pierced his chest and went plunging on through him he made no sound at all.

He did scream as he fell backwards—shrilly and horribly for an instant.

But there was no one to hear.

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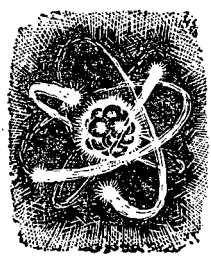

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an ode to genius

by . . . Dal Stivens

A pure fantasy tale that is so timely, so intensely applicable to the moment in which we live.

THERE WAS ONCE a young ostrich of genius. So daring and original was his thinking as he neared maturity, it caused his teachers and his parents much anxiety. Finally his father took him aside and had a talk with him.

"I hear you have been cutting your How-To-Bury-Your-Head-in-the-Sand Classes, son? Is this true?"

"It is true, father," said the young ostrich. "I feel I can no longer attend them with a free conscience. I am completely convinced that when we put our heads in the sand and poke our rumps up in the air, far from avoiding trouble we are, in fact, inviting it. We ostriches should stand with our heads high and face whatever threatens. Now, don't you agree with me?"

The father made a mark in the sand with his big toe before replying. When he spoke there was a mistiness in his eye and his voice was gently melancholic with parental disapproval.

"My son, when I was young like you I once wondered about that very same thing. Indeed, I once thought of putting such a

You've probably guessed by this time our favorite "Down-Under" Australian writer. We almost called him "our" discovery—but Fred Pohl tells us COLLIER'S *used him first. And now the Young Ostrich of this delightful piece joins that coterie of whimsey, "Carney Jimmy" and "Frying-Pan Fred."*

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theory to the test—" The old ostrich broke off.

"And then?" asked the young ostrich eagerly.

"I met your mother," said the old ostrich, "and she was able to convince me of the truth in what everyone else was saying: that ostriches have been shoving their heads in the sand for thousands of years and that this way of life had stood the test of time, so—"

"But it's not true!" cried the young ostrich passionately. "Bulls get angry when they see red cloth, but why not a bit of green cloth or beau rose?"

"I see I can't reason with you," said the old ostrich. "I can only appeal to your heart. Son, don't make your mother unhappy. Think what you like about the classes but attend them to please her, until you reach your maturity." The father paused before going on. "You may think I am asking you a great deal, but you have overlooked one thing."

"What's that?" cried the young ostrich. "I have gone most carefully into this matter, and I feel deeply about it . . . ."

"There are no dangers in this desert," said the old ostrich. "There are no wild beasts or birds of prey, so your problem is only an academic one, as I discovered, too." The father grew thoughtful. "Perhaps I have been a little unfair to your mother."

"You're right, though," cried the young ostrich. "This desert is *too* safe!"

But the young ostrich did as his father asked. However, as soon as he reached his maturity he set off from the safe desert into the unknown, resisting the tears of his mother and of a springhtly young female ostrich with whom he had pecked his first packet of tacks.

The young ostrich journeyed for three weeks and was despairing of being able to put his theory to the test, when a whirlwind whisked him up into the air, carried him for some hundreds of miles and set him down gently in another desert. The first things he saw were a date palm and another ostrich.

"Excuse me," said the young ostrich, "but are there any dangers here?"

"Any amount," said the other ostrich. "There is the billy-goat —he is perhaps the worst—and there's the eagle, the jackal, the hyena, and the—"

"Don't tell me any more!" cried the young ostrich joyfully. "Hurray for danger!" His delight made him giddy and he leaned against the date palm until he recovered.

The other ostrich stalked off, shaking his head over the follies of strangers, and was just about to nibble a piece of grass when what he saw over his shoulder made him thrust his head down hurriedly into the sand.

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Coming over a sand dune was a very bad-tempered billy-goat who took a quick sight through his horns on the ostrich's rump and charged. The ostrich was knocked flat and the billy-goat strutted off exclaiming, "I never can resist a sitting shot like that!"

"Just as I've always claimed!" said the bright young ostrich to himself.

He had only repeated this observation to himself twice when he saw the other ostrich staggering to his feet and dazedly shoving his head into the sand once more. Reeling down from the sky came an eagle, who struck the ostrich cruelly with his talons in the rear and slew him. The eagle tore off a few shreds of ostrich meat, swallowed them and flew up into the air remarking, "I am not hungry, but I simply cannot restrain myself when I see an ostrich with his head buried in the sand."

The bright young ostrich had no time to comment on this because he saw the billy-goat charging him, head down.

"Here's my big moment!" cried the young ostrich and threw his head high, flexed and unflexed the muscles of his right leg as he awaited the charge.

The billy-goat was muttering, "It's a little inconsiderate of him, not burying his head. I'll just have to take a head-on shot at him."

The goat came on fast to within a few feet of the ostrich and then, disconcerted, swerved to one side and went slap into the date palm. In the same instant the young ostrich let go with a terrific kick that got the goat under the chin and threw him ten yards.

Five minutes later the billy-goat picked himself up. As soon as he could focus his dazed eyes on the ostrich he began to upbraid him. "How dare you face me as I charge you! I might have broken my neck! Everything is becoming so unreliable these days, nothing you can trust! An ostrich is supposed to bury his head in the sand, didn't you know that?"

The young ostrich just laughed at him so the billy-goat went on his way swearing revenge. The young ostrich was so delighted with the success of his theory that he had no feeling of animosity toward the goat.

At that moment the eagle came flashing down out of the sky, diving toward the young ostrich who stood staring up at him. "He's a bit slow about burying his head," the eagle thought, "but the young are slow to react to old customs. No doubt he will put his rear up in the air and let me get a good sight by the time I end my dive."

The young ostrich watched the eagle come, cried, "This is a wonderful desert!" threw his head

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high, and tensed the toes of his right leg as he waited.

The eagle came diving down, became flustered at the last moment and veered into the palm tree. The young ostrich kicked the eagle a lusty one as he swerved past. When the eagle got his breath back he, too, made some bewildered comments and went off vowing vengeance.

Soon the eagle caught up with the billy-goat. They decided to approach the lion, the king of beasts. The lion listened boredly to their complaints. Patting back a yawn with his huge paw, he said, "A most unorthodox ostrich. We'll soon settle *his* hash!"

The lion stretched himself, yawned once more, then began to roar loudly. The billy-goat and the eagle shrank back.

"We shall call on this fellow," said the lion, between loud and angry roars. Finally he set off at a fierce lope that sent the sand scuddering under his pads, the eagle and the billy-goat at his heels.

Half an hour later the lion came up with the young ostrich. The lion roared fiercely, then charged. The young ostrich waited, his head high. The lion came on until he was ten yards away. Then he stopped dead in a flurry of sand.

"You can have it!" said the lion.

"What can I have?" asked the bright young ostrich.

"Everything," said the lion. "Crown and bauble. Scepter and sword. No king can rule when he doesn't know what to expect of his subjects. You've started a revolt, my lad, and I'm getting out while there's still time. It's all yours."

The young ostrich took a little time to take it all in, but finally he said, "This is the supreme vindication of my theory!"

The lion called a meeting of his subjects and handed over the crown to the young ostrich as he stood proudly under the date palm. The hyena, the jackal, the falcon, the buzzard and other animals and birds made speeches. Even the eagle and the billy-goat tried to be gracious. One by one his new subjects saluted their new monarch and withdrew. The last to leave was the lion.

"Well, good luck, my boy," he said. "You'll need it."

"I shall found a dynasty of Head High Ostriches," said the new king of beasts and birds.

The new king inspected his new domain on the following day. Everywhere he was received with respectful salutes. The jackal put a paw up as he slunk past. The hyena bowed, the billy-goat jigged his beard and the eagle, buzzard and falcon dipped their wings respectfully as they flew above him.

Receiving these tributes, the bright young ostrich thought sadly, "How benighted our race has

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been all these ages because of its cowardly escape from reality. And the answer was so simple—merely to stand erect and look squarely at the enemy . . ."

"Everything going well, I hope?" said a voice.

The ostrich looked round, saw the lion raising a languid paw in salute.

"Magnificently!" said the young ostrich. "Superbly! My spirit soars and all is now right with the world!"

The lion shook his head gravely and stalked away.

The young ostrich ruled for two uneventful days. On the third morning of his rule he was gazing contemptuously at the sand under his feet when the jackal ran forward boldly on the tips of his toes and slashed at the new king's neck. The ostrich just avoided the teeth by ducking his head. He had no sooner done so than the billy-goat slunk in and tried to nip him on the leg. The eagle ran in on foot, the buzzard and the falcon followed, the hyena climbed the date palm and dived down on the ostrich. And last of all the lion charged, saying as he came, "I tried to warn you, my lad."

Though surprised the young ostrich was not frightened. "Up the Head High Ostriches!" he cried as he kicked the billy-goat back. "One hour of glorious life," he shouted as he upper-cutted with a right leg, a left and a right and the eagle, the buzzard and the falcon went down, "is worth an age without a name!" Still kicking he floored the hyena and the lion and pecked the jackal.

But his subjects rallied and came back again and again, varying their attack and borrowing techniques from each other. The young ostrich fought them furiously and valiantly but he was eventually defeated.

"Well, that's the end of him," said the billy-goat, stamping on the body. "Now we can go back to where we were."

"Perhaps," said the lion.

"Good riddance," said the eagle.

"Perhaps," said the lion again.

The animals and birds started to move off.

"Wait," said the lion. "An absolute monarchy is now obviously impossible so we should agree to meet now and discuss a new constitution."

The birds and the animals were startled at first, but upon reflection agreed with the lion's proposal and started to leave once more.

"Wait," said the lion again. He touched the bright young ostrich's body tenderly. "Now we can honor him. He must be buried with great dignity and we shall start immediately the writing of biographies extolling his courage and his genius."

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exotic dawn

by . . . Algis Budrys

He had to invent something new. Otherwise there was only retreat into sleep—or complete disaster.

IT WAS eight years since Cochrane's ship had fluttered out of hyperspace like a gutted marlin and laid its length across the long grass and granite outcroppings of the meadow. And for those eight years, he had been unconsciously losing small fragments of his sense of wonder at this unknown and uncharted world.

With each day, the planet revealed a bit more of its nature to him so that for some time now he had been without his first sense that, in such an exotic and mysterious world, something mysterious and exotic was forever trembling at the brink of tomorrow's dawn, waiting to uncover itself to him.

The cabin, cut and fitted together out of the faintly scented logs of the trees at the meadow's edge, had taken him more than six months, GST, to erect. The two following years had been spent in sledging equipment and accessories over the grassy roll of the meadow and into the cabin, in mounting the auxiliary power pile and stringing leads. And in a bit-by-bit process of rearrangement and refinement until the

Since Algis Budrys took a "walk across the moon" in a story by that name some twenty months ago he has continually brought exotic dawns to science fiction. And we do not dare use that phrase in a facetious sense. His well-written stories are not only startlingly original, they are spiced with a fine flavoring of strangeness that uncovers new wonders at every turn.

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cabin and its facilities were as convenient and comfortable as he could make them.

This had sufficed for almost a year. Then he had stripped the interior of the cabin back down to its logs and begun the process anew. This time making the distribution of furnishings and equipment as difficult to adjust to as possible, so that he spent the maximum amount of time in performing his daily routine. He was, for a time, as seriously devotional of his ingenuity to the problem of circumventing his difficulties as he had been in creating them.

Following that, he walked into the forest unarmed and unequipped. But, while the challenge of hunting and sheltering himself without the help of tools had been an absorbing one for a time, there was no local fauna capable of furnishing unexpected and unpredictable complications. After a while, with disconcerting rapidity, it became a routine as inevitable as any that had established itself at the cabin.

So, in the end he had gone back to the cabin and had, in time, discovered that it was quite possible to sleep at least three-quarters of the day every day, apparently with no influence on either his dreams or the thought processes from which they were sprung.

He came awake now and stared sleepily up at the man standing beside his bunk and looking down at him. A faint smile stretched between the indrawn corners of the man's mouth and it was as unmoving as the ship which Cochrane could see through the open doorway. Both were standing in absolute stillness. Both were black-clad; the ship in paint and the man in a black uniform trimmed with tarnished silver piping. And, as the strange ship stood poised beside the sprawled length of Cochrane's ruined vessel, so the stranger stood beside Cochrane's bunk.

Cochrane swung his feet to the floor and stood up.

"My God!" he said. "I didn't hear you land! How long have you been here? Where are you from? How did you ever find—"

The stranger let him talk, his smile deepening. But finally he touched Cochrane's shoulder with the tips of his broad fingers and the contact seemed to cut off the flow of words in mid-question.

"You've been here quite a while, haven't you?" the stranger said. "My name is Van Deen. I'm the Master of that ship out there."

"Cochrane. Michael Cochrane. I have been here a long time. And, man, I'm glad to see you!" Cochrane shook Van Deen's hand, feeling the work-hardness of the man's callouses. He twisted his mouth into a grin. "Been a long time since I've touched another human hand."

"I imagine." The smile which

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had not once left the man's face entirely, now became reflective. "It's been something of a while for myself, as well. I'm a trader," he went on. "No specific course or destination. Load a cargo here, try to peddle it there. Sometimes, it's quite a while between planetfalls."

"I'll bet," Cochrane agreed. "But I'm damned glad you made this one."

"Not exactly my choice," Van Deen explained, the smile becoming a bit rueful. "I had a little trouble with my engines. One of my fuel feed mechanisms began to malfunction, and it was a question of either finding a landing place immediately or else attempting a repair in space. Luckily I saw this planet and, of course, spotted the wreck of your vessel. And here I am," he finished, spreading his hands, his shoulders shrugging in a gesture that Cochrane had last seen fifteen years ago, in Earth's Europe.

"Fuel feed mechanism, eh?" Cochrane said. It was unthinkable that the ship couldn't be made to function so that he could be rescued. Still, the fine clarity of his initial elation was somewhat diminished. "What type?" he asked quickly.

Van Deen frowned. "I'm not quite sure," he said, his voice half-apologetic. "I'm not too familiar with . . ." He broke off, shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure. Been a lot of design changes. Man can't be expected to keep up with all of them," Cochrane explained for him. At this point it was very important to him that there be nothing strange or inexplicable about his rescuer. "I suppose your crew's working on it?"

Van Deen shook his head. "I am alone."

Alone! In a ship that size?"

Van Deen's smile was a quick flash. "The ship almost flies itself. I am rather glad my crew left me. It has been a long time since we left home, and their responsibility was never as great as mine. It is lonelier, true, but, one by one, they served out their time." His clouded blue eyes turned darker and a brooding look touched his face.

Cochrane was starkly aware of the complete bewilderment on his own face. "I don't—" he began, then cut the sentence off. There'd be time enough later. "Couldn't you hire men to replace them?"

Van Deen shook his head. "I'm afraid the wages would not be a sufficient return for what would be expected of them. In any case," he went on, breaking free of the mood which had settled over him momentarily, "it's much better this way. Except, of course, in a case such as this. And even then, you see, things have been so arranged that it is not serious." He laughed. "Now, will you fix the broken mechanism in my ship?" He brought his hand down on

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Cochrane's shoulder. *Will you?*

"You bet your wooden shoes I will," Cochrane laughed in response. "I've been on this rock too damned long for anybody's taste." As he said it he was conscious of the absolute truth in the statement. Only now did he realize how desperately lonely he had become in his solitude.

Because Van Deen and his ship were his promise of rescue, and because Van Deen was the first human being he had seen since leaving Centaurus, five months before the explosion in his field generators, he had no wish to search the man's incongruities too closely. If any man does not look a gift horse too closely in the mouth, then a man stranded far from home certainly demands no credentials of whoever it is with whom he will have to ride double.

"Good!" Van Deen laughed at Cochrane's exclamation. "I will go and bring it here."

Cochrane hesitated. "Be easier if I work on it in the ship, won't it?"

"I don't think so," Van Deen said. The tone of his voice kept his words from being the curt objection they would normally have seemed to be, making them a simple statement of opinion.

Cochrane shrugged. "Any way you want it."

Van Deen smiled and slapped Cochrane's shoulder again. Then he walked out of the cabin and across to his ship. The lean length of his body was a black vertical bar against the green until it was blotted out by the equal black of the ship's hull.

Cochrane watched him from the cabin doorway. A small and fiendish segment of his mind whispered that the entire thing was a dream or an illusion, that the ship would suddenly rise and be gone, leaving him again in the clutch of his awful solitude. But, after twenty minutes, while the sweat collected in the ridges of Cochrane's palms, Van Deen emerged from the ship, the malfunctioning injector cradled in his arms.

Cochrane had never seen an injector quite like it. Still, it had been eight years since he'd been cut off from human technology, and ship design was a notoriously changeable thing. He brought the injector into the cabin, laid it on the table. He disassembled it carefully, inspecting each part for some sign of wear or damage.

Van Deen's thin face watched over his shoulder. He said, "It is a complicated piece of work, I know. Will it take long?"

"Don't know," Cochrane grunted. "The trouble might not be in this thing at all, you know. Might be in the controls. Wish you'd let me go into the ship."

Now that he felt that Van Deen was obligated to take him off the planet, the irrational fear that he would not had lessened, and with it had come a measure of freedom

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to be somewhat critical of the man. It was almost appalling, to Cochrane's mind, that a man could become Master of a ship and remain so ignorant of the mechanisms which constituted his command.

Van Deen shook his head. "There are no controls. This is the entire unit."

"No controls? You mean, this thing's automatic?" He looked closer at the scattered parts. None of them, as far as he could see, could possibly constitute a servomechanism.

He grinned suddenly. He had not been in contact with a charming liar for many years. Of course Van Deen was pulling his leg.

He glanced outside and saw that it was getting dark. "I'll probably be a good part of the night and all day tomorrow on this," he said. "You might as well get some sleep."

"All right. Is it all right if I sleep outside? I—" Van Deen's voice was embarrassed and tinged with a curiously melancholy longing, "I've been closed up in the ship too long to have any love for a roof."

"Suit yourself," Cochrane said. "Half the planet's yours." He laughed. "Matter of fact, as far as I'm concerned, the whole thing's yours."

Van Deen smiled. "Thank you," he said, bowing from the waist in a cheerful burlesque of the courtly manners which must have been drummed into him at some point in his past.

Cochrane grinned back.

He was at work again when Van Deen joined him the next morning.

"What in God's name are you burning for fuel?" Cochrane asked as he wrenched the last bolt back into place. He pointed at a pile of filthy rags. "Anthracite? I took half of Pennsylvania out of that doohickey."

Van Deen shrugged. "I don't know." After that one look over Cochrane's shoulder the previous night he had showed absolutely no interest in the injector. He had slept or gone on a roving hike over the meadow and through the forest at its edge, his steps springy, a tight, excited twist to his smile and a joyous light in his eyes as he stopped occasionally and took deep breaths of the crisp air of the planet.

"You don't know?" After the first shock of incredulity, Cochrane's shoulders slumped in disgust.

"It is not necessary," Van Deen explained. "It was not in the contract. That is the other party's obligation. But the fuel is not anthracite. Anthracite was used in the early Twentieth Century. After that there was Diesel oil and turbines. Then there were the atomic piles, and still turbines. Machines!" He spread his hands. "Too many machines and always

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changing. How could I learn them all?"

"What?"

"It's not important," Van Deen said quickly. He smiled. "Fuel for machines I don't know. But fuel for men—that is something else. So, the mechanism is repaired. I'll take it back to the ship. Then I will come back and we will celebrate. You've heard of arrack?"

Compounded with the thought that this was his last night on the planet, the anticipation of the taste of a drink after all these years swept any other preoccupation out of Cochrane's mind.

"I'll have mine straight," he chuckled. "And hurry it up!"

Cochrane downed his drink and enjoyed his pleasantly tingling throat. Finally he said, "I haven't been this far off the ground in eight years!" He slumped in his chair. Van Deen sat across the table. "Y'know, this is one of things I planned for when I got back. If I got back." He chuckled again. "Had the whole thing worked out. Good liquor—work up a real glow—and some Earthside cigarettes." He took another sip of Van Deen's arrack. "Hey, I haven't seen you smoke."

Van Deen shook his head, the constant smile now regretful. "When the contract was drawn up it did not include tobacco. I'm sorry I have none to offer you."

Cochrane waved his hand negligently. "Probably make me sick anyway." He leaned forward and grinned at Van Deen. "Y'know, you're a peculiar guy. But you're a nice guy. I don't understand you sometimes, but you're all right. Guess it takes all kinds to make up a Universe."

He threw his head back, said, "Gonna sing. Haven't sung in eight years, but I'm gonna sing now.

"Oh, there's the Highland Dutch
"And the Lowland Dutch,
"The Rotterdam Dutch,
"And the God damned Dut—"

He choked on the word, was suddenly terribly sober.

"The-God-damned-Dutch," he repeated in a low voice. He laid his hands flat on the table to still their tremble. "Okay," he said finally, his voice steady. "Okay, so you're the *Flying Dutchman.* Now, where do we go from here?"

Van Deen reached out and filled his own glass with arrack. "That's not true," he said calmly. The smile had disappeared, leaving a thin, somber-eyed and lined face behind it. The man's stiff blond hair was glistening with sweat.

"You're lying," Cochrane accused him.

"No."

"Yes!"

Van Deen sighed. "Let us review the situation," he said. "You are marooned on this planet—a planet which, I might

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remind you, is not marked on any chart, is not anywhere near the normal shipping lanes, and which lies in a region of space which the Survey ships will not begin to catalogue for another fifty thousand years—if there is still a Federation at that time.

"In any case, your ship, your cabin, and your bones, will have become indivisibly merged with the very molecules of this planet by the time the next ship touches here. There will be no more liquor, no more cigarettes, no more women. No more adventures, no more star wandering—only a life of complete stagnation and isolation.

"You are not the type to enjoy such a life. You are constitutionally incapable of it. Your mind rebels at the very thought. You think of ways to occupy yourself, and when you can invent nothing more, there is only retreat into sleep.

"Finally a ship does land—my ship. Here is rescue, here is return to the life which you had thought to be irretrievably lost. But the long years have done their work. The retreat-habit is strong. So you cannot accept the thought of rescue. You must put difficulties in your own way. You seize upon the fact that I am a Hollander—

"So," the smile was back, "I am the *Fliegender Hollander*. And of course you cannot come back with me in my accursed ship. Perhaps, you have decided that the contract now calls for only one man—after all these years, it would, of course—for the chief blasphemer. And perhaps you say to yourself: 'If he can find someone to take his place then he does not have to go himself'."

Cochrane set his jaw. "And if I do think so . . . ?"

Van Deen smiled and shrugged. "Then, my friend, I cannot convince you otherwise. I will take my ship, which you have so kindly repaired, and I will fly away and leave you."

Cochrane's fist closed around his glass and the flat of his other hand slapped down on the table. "No! You can't do that!"

"Ah, but what other choice have I?"

Cochrane stared out of the doorway with defeated eyes. "I don't know." He poured the glass full and drank half of it with a nervous fling of his head. "Prove you're not!" he said sharply.

Van Deen spread his hands. "Why should I? It is in your own interest to develop your own proof. Think for a moment. Think of everything I have done and said since I landed. Sift through what you've learned of me and my ship. Is there nothing that would indicate that I do not operate according to some kind of supernatural code?"

"There isn't," Cochrane said quickly.

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"Think," Van Deen answered, his smile patient.

Cochrane frowned, his hand flattening around the glass until a smooth expanse of whitened skin showed through from the inside. "The injector . . ." he said slowly.

Van Deen raised an eyebrow, said, "Yes?" without an alteration in the smoothness of his voice.

"Why should it foul up? If your ship was a sort of modernization of the old *Flying Dutchman,* still bound by the original curse, there'd be no logical reason why it would *need* repairs."

"Ah! I knew you'd find something. You see? A man in as desperate a situation as you will always find something."

"Yes, by God!" Cochrane's voice held all the conviction of a man who has convinced himself. "I'm sure of it!"

Van Deen's face was lost, now, in the shadows of the cabin. "Come," he said. "I'll take you now and show you the ship."

"What did all that talk mean? About a contract, and the crew?"

"You'll see."

"Look, I'm not sure—"

"Later." Van Deen urged Cochrane up the ladder into the open airlock. They clambered up into the lock and Cochrane stood swaying, the arrack bottle still in one hand, as Van Deen touched the stud on the inner door.

"Look," Van Deen said quietly. Cochrane turned in time to see the ship's inner door swing back.

The interior of the ship was a shell, without compartmentation, without machinery, without floors or ladders. Blank, featureless metal fell away beneath his feet, curving to form a cup far down at the stern. He looked up and saw the matching curve that filled the bow.

"It's empty!" he whispered. The hoarseness of his voice filled the hollow ship.

"Not any more," Van Deen said as he closed the lock door. He pushed the stud for the outer door and slipped through before it closed, clambering down the ladder just before it retracted into the hull.

He ran a few paces away from the ship and stood ankle-deep in the thick green grass, breathing deeply of the crisp clean air.

"No, Cochrane, I am not the Flying Dutchman," he whispered. "Not any more. *You* are!"

The black ship rose as it had come—silently, invisible in the night, with no need for jets. Van Deen watched it go, his lip trembling as tears rolled down his lean cheeks. "Rescued at last!" he murmured. "At long last!"

Then he turned, without looking up at the stars, and went to explore the planet that had held no further charm for Cochrane—to discover what it was that tomorrow's dawn would reveal to him on this mysterious and exotic planet.

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classified object

by . . . John Victor Peterson

There was a comic book in the alien space ship—of a sort. But it wasn't meant for children.

THIS, *for the greater part, George Winthrop learned later:*

The harried controller observing the airport surveillance radarscope in the La Guardia Airport control tower that sultry night at first ignored the uncommonly bright blip creeping in from the 'scope's periphery.

Blips thirty miles out are of little significance; there are too many other airports within the radius with their own traffic problems. This return was coming from northwest of Teterboro, New Jersey. Let Teterboro Tower worry about it!

The weather was worsening and the Air Route Traffic Control Center already had traffic stacked up and holding—traffic he could not ignore!

But his tired eyes were repeatedly drawn to the fantastically registering blip as it traced some object's bee line path in from the northwest, progressively advancing across the electronic range-marks, and maintaining a constant course toward the Airport, as charted by the indicator's reference bearing mark. Over New

Whether in science fiction or on the screen the starkly realistic documentary has become increasingly popular in recent months. When handled with deftness, and brilliant technical skill it is very likely to ring the bell at the apex of the entertainment meter. John Victor Peterson lives in Jackson Heights, close to the scene he describes. He has also a sound grasp of the intricacies of space navigation on all levels.

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Hackensack now, moving across the 'scope's overlay map toward the George Washington Bridge—

The return's strength easily equaled that from a dirigible and far exceeded that from a commercial ship. The blip was too bright, the trail behind it too long, too remarkably persistent.

Possibly the Air Force has some super-Globemaster that might account for the blip. But in that case a flight plan would have been filed on so huge a craft's trip into the metropolitan area.

It was damnably puzzling!

There was something inexorable about the steady, precise progress of the object which brought mounting, unaccountable alarm.

He raised his head, his thin, tense face doubly shadowed by the amber light of the 'scope's filter and the radar tent's ultraviolet lighting.

"Hey, Bill!" he shouted. "I've either picked up something strictly unclassified, or gone cockeyed!"

The chief controller crowded into the radar tent beside him.

"Where—*oh,* oh! I'm calling Mitchel Field. This is for the Air Force!"

I

It was warm that night with the breathless, enervating warmth before a summer storm—too warm certainly to sit below in the apartment in idle discussion, knowing that his brother and sister-in-law would have resented missing the TV shows which a modest purse made their sole entertainment.

Earlier George Winthrop had excused himself and gone to the apartment building's roof to watch the steady procession of planes coming in under the murky, threatening overcast over Jackson Heights—planes which swept spectacularly low over Grand Central Parkway to the runway, their throttled engines coughing loudly in the closeness of the night.

He leaned against the concrete and brick parapet, looking disinterestedly at the round red eyes of the airport's approach light lane staring unblinkingly at the threatening sky toward Brooklyn.

He was chokingly filled with thoughts of yesterday's work, and of his planned tomorrow, impatient with the enforced vacation of today.

His eyes wandered blindly toward the northern sky, and cleared suddenly, focussing.

Coming in over the airport at less than four hundred feet altitude was an unilluminated cylinder, pointed at the nose, bulbous at the stern. It was descending almost imperceptibly, moving with unbelievable slowness for its apparent size and lack of airfoils.

He knew at once that he behold something the like of which no nation on Earth had presumed to make—except as a mockup on a picture lot.

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Spaceship, his mind registered.

With mounting excitement he saw the object slowly crossing through the beam of the ceiling light pointing up from the airport's Administration Building. It moved without visible means of propulsion. Was it moving silently? He couldn't be sure, for several planes were noisily warming for takeoff between it and his vantage point.

He'd watched aircraft, V-2's and various missiles too long to miss the significance of the object's glide angle. Unless it lifted under power it would surely descend in the Flushing area. He turned, raced across the roof, and descended quickly to the street, his heart beating like a bass drum. Ten minutes later, as he swung his car toward Grand Central Parkway, he felt time's urgency, the beating pulse that had measured out minutes that so often could have been the *last* minutes—when he'd perched upon high towers removing the connecting plugs of fission bombs that had failed to detonate—

Oh, God! Not this stomach-wrenching nervousness again!

His eyes flicked momentarily to the dashboard's vacant panel which had held the clock he'd smashed that day when time's pressure had grown too great . . .

Forget it! he told himself almost frantically. *You're over that! You're well again!*

He sped past the airport, curved under the bridge where Northern Boulevard's eastbound lane crosses the parkway, and found the heavy late evening traffic out of Manhattan stalled, blocking all three lanes ahead.

It must have landed in Flushing Meadow Park!

On impulse, he swung right and up around to Northern Boulevard, crossing over the parkway. He cut left through a half-moon turnaround—the wrong way—and swung deftly through the westbound traffic into the Boat Basin, and then back under the boulevard on the undulating road through the park.

Passing under the towering elevated structure and the railroad overpass, he discovered with a strange mixture of exultation and apprehension that his deduction had been correct. The cylinder lay in smothering folds of darkness on the gently rising slope near The City of New York Building.

He stopped, leaving the car's motor running, its headlights on high beam. Quickly he took a Geiger counter from the glove compartment and, dismounting, approached the object.

The counter failed to respond. There was not even heat radiation. To his cautious touch the stern was neither warmer nor cooler than the night.

He gazed fascinatedly at the object's expanse. Two hundred feet long, he guessed, increasing

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from its pointed bow to about a thirty foot diameter at its midpoint. The diameter was constant back to a point thirty feet forward of the stern, then became abruptly bulbous. It resembled a monstrous gourd—*bearing what strange seeds?*

Undoubtedly this silent, implacable thing came from far beyond man's ken, a misshapen *Nautilus* fitted out to probe the void. Had it come deliberately or had it blundered—a derelict?—to Earth?

The sultry night suddenly filled with sound. Awed and frightened motorists broke through the fence from Grand Central Parkway, and streamed across the park until a voice cried out authoritatively:

"Keep back! This is the Army! This is a restricted area!"

Other figures raced from within the park. Anti-aircraft crews, Winthrop thought.

The man who had shouted the orders was coming toward him.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"It isn't just idle curiosity, lieutenant," Winthrop said, quickly. "I'm a physicist. Los Alamos and other places. I'm afraid I'm damnably curious when something unclassified drops into our ordered world."

"I see. All right, stick around, maybe you can help us classify it!"

The lieutenant smiled, and swung away.

Winthrop stood there alone as the soldiers got rid of the other civilians and established guard-posts, then as prime movers urgently and noisily brought up ack-ack guns, searchlights, and engine generators.

There was a bawling of commands, a tense, noisy excitement. Under the encircling searchlights' glare guards walked short posts, sub-machine guns ready. The noise subsided.

Everything was in readiness and, Winthrop thought, God grant that everything would be enough!

Suddenly lightning forked across the sky. With the crashing thunder came a teeming rain which drove Winthrop hastily back to his car.

The radiator coolant was boiling murmurously amid the rain's driving tumult. Winthrop shut off the lights and engine, sat staring through the streaming windshield at the smooth, enigmatic surface of the cylinder on the slope.

There was a sleep-provoking magic in the downpour's prolonged pattern.

Oh, ship of space, the rains of Earth will wash your surface clean!

II

He awoke at dawn, stiff from the unnatural position of his sleep, momentarily confused as to his whereabouts. Then he caught sight of the cylinder, and memory came sweeping back.

Had something come out of it?

Descending from the car, he approached a group of men

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standing near the object. A short, heavy-set major general who appeared to be in command turned sharp, suspicious eyes toward him.

"What are you doing here?"

Winthrop introduced himself. The general's suspicion vanished and he clasped the younger man's hand warmly.

"I'm Bert Hill, Winthrop. I heard of your work from Benton Allan. He's a close personal friend."

"Of mine, too," Winthrop nodded. "Haven't seen him since Nevada."

"He's flying up from Los Alamos," Hill said. "Many of your colleagues are coming—everyone who might conceivably be useful."

"Any sign of life?" Winthrop asked, gesturing toward the cylinder.

"No. There's a port amidships, and some small apertures forward. But it might as well be a coffin! Why don't you look it over? But perhaps you'd like to get comfortable and have breakfast first. We've set up a temporary mess kitchen in the City Building."

"Thanks, General Hill."

"Call me Bert."

When George Winthrop returned he found that a sizable group of tired-looking civilians had joined the military. Most of them were men with whom he had been associated. Greetings were brief, detailed personal reminiscenses sternly contraindicated.

They examined the cylinder. With a great deal of effort an engineer succeeded in unfastening the port lugs. Signal Corps movie cameras whirred as the port opened, but nothing emerged.

"Carry on, George," General Hill said. "You've priority."

"Hadn't we better wait?" the other protested. "Who knows what an alien might consider trespass?"

"We've got to risk it," the general said. "Perhaps they need our help. Perhaps they're ill or injured."

Hill and Winthrop peered into the interior.

Vacuum tubes shone dully through an indistinct maze of ductwork, circuitry, relay banks. And directly before them, facing the port—

"It's a fission bomb!" Bert's nervousness was suddenly wild within Winthrop. He fought it. "Amazingly like ours!" He grasped the port tightly, fighting trembling unease with taut muscles.

"I must look at it more closely," he went on. "It may not be fully armed, but I'd better disarm the detonating device if I can. If it's anything like ours, it wouldn't take much tinkering to set it off. There's probably enough explosive in the detonator alone to ruin the interior completely. We could be trapped inside, and blown apart." He paused, then added courageously, "I'll need

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light to get the plugs out quickly."

"That looks like a button switch," the general volunteered, reaching into the port.

Winthrop slapped his hand away. "Don't be a fool. The slightest touch might detonate it."

"Guess you're right," the general conceded, turning away. "Montemur, run an extension over here."

Winthrop crawled into the ship, arose, and stared in bitter indecision.

He remembered a blockhouse at Bikini, another at Frenchman's Flat, voices harsh on loudspeakers counting the seconds away to zero. He remembered armed bombs on ghastly, towering frameworks of steel vibrating beneath his touch with the furious kiss of atomic death awaiting the slightest slipping of his fingers.

Get on with it!

He did. The plugs were out. He was faint, drenched with perspiration.

The general was peering intently through the port.

"It's okay now, Bert."

Cautiously the general entered, then turned back with an abrupt gesture. "Montemur," he cried to the Signal Corps major, "the equipment in here is still energized. Take shots of everything. We musn't chance accidentally disarranging a single circuit. We've perhaps acquired a means of conquering space. We mustn't ruin it through carelessness."

Major Montemur joined them with a camera.

"The electronics boys will love this," Winthrop said, pointing sternward.

Catwalks crisscrossed the complicated cluster of machinery. Everything was amazingly accessible, the ductwork transparent.

"Strange, George," the general mused. "The science that constructed this must closely parallel ours. Can't you see the similarities?"

Winthrop nodded. "I think so. Not that I'm qualified to judge—"

Behind the bomb was a bulkhead shutting off the ship's forward portion in the middle of which was a great round door. Set securely in the door was a complicated instrument. The symbols on the dials and controls were utterly alien.

Among the dials was what was apparently a timing device with twenty-eight subdivisions, a slowly sweeping hand. It was silent but Winthrop heard whispering in his mind the pounding time of the spinning planet of some other sun, and the urgency and great import of time returned to torment him. He had fought it while working on the bomb, and now he fought it again.

"Bert," he said, "this part of the ship wasn't designed for entrance during space flight. In a pressure suit, maybe, yes. Otherwise we can only assume that the crew doesn't require an atmos-

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phere. Life may have evolved quite differently *elsewhere.*"

"I don't believe it. I doubt that there's a thinking being of our equal anywhere that isn't human or humanoid. Take your own comments about the machinery. And what about the books?"

"Books?" Winthrop followed the general's gaze.

Protruding from beneath the bomb's afterbody was a thick, finely-bound volume lying upon a thinner, very tattered one. Picking both books up with trepidation, he examined the larger volume first. Its hard covers were marked with alien characters similar to those on the bulkhead instrument. He skimmed the pages, finding sections of either printed language or mathematics, still others of detailed schematics and precise drawings.

"The electronics engineers and linguists can work on this," he said. "Association of the schematics with the equipment, and the equipment's physical measurements and functionings with the printing may allow us to crack both math and language!"

The other volume was more puzzling. "No cover," the general said. "Pages missing. Bert, it looks lige a *comic book!*"

They thumbed through that second book, sickened by the abysmal thought that somewhere some alien artist had perverted an obviously great talent to please and amuse the immature. Their hasty perusal revealed an obviously imaginative tale of a pastoral world's invasion by the rapacious, plundering vanguard of a humanoid race with many-digited, strangely-jointed hands.

"The psych boys can have this," Winthrop said, apprehensively searching the shadows about them.

They looked at the bulkhead door, then simultaneously at each other.

"Do you think there may be something alive in there?" the general asked.

"Perhaps. It's pointless to try to open the door now, though. The occupants may be in suspended animation. It might be tricky to bring them out of it without harming them. We've thought of suspended animation as one solution to survival in the big jump once we've found a means of propulsion plus suspended animation."

"The propulsion's arrived, George. Maybe we'll find the other. We'll let the electronics men in here now. They should be able to shed some light on this equipment."

As General Hill assembled the electronics men, Winthrop walked away. Associates addressed him curiously, but he merely nodded in absent-minded fashion. He was several yards from the ship when he suddenly became aware that someone was challenging him —the lieutenant he had met the night before.

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"Just walking," Winthrop explained.

He saw a gnarled, forlorn apple tree just beyond the perimeter of the guard posts. Almost pleadingly he said, "I'd like to go over there if you don't mind."

"Hell, I don't mind," the lieutenant said, "but don't go any farther!"

Winthrop still clutched the picture book. *A warning?* A chill swept him. Was the ship indeed a coffin for the corpses of the survivors of a pastoral race who had sought to escape, but whose knowledge of time and space had not been adequate?

The lieutenant was surveying him quizzically.

"Thanks," Winthrop said, and walked to the tree.

He sat down, and opened the book again. He thumbed through it repeatedly, the pictures creating a sickness in him.

"Hello," a little girl's voice said.

Winthrop looked up. Six? Seven? He could only be sure that she was blond and blue-eyed, and had apparently come from the direction of the botanical gardens. She clutched roller skates in her arms.

"Hello," Winthrop said. "Where are *you* going?"

"To the skating rinks."

"Oh, you can't. They're closed."

Her face grew solemn. "But Mommy and Daddy said I could." She was about to cry.

He felt a bachelor's inadequacy. "Where are they?" he asked.

"Over in the bot—bot—" She struggled valiantly and then said, "the flower gardens!" She eyed the book eagerly. "May I see the comics?"

Comics? Oh, the book!

He handed it to her wordlessly, saw her eyes show immediate, outright horror. He stared aghast as she threw it down and ran wildly away, her skates forgotten on the grass, her broken sobs and screams echoing back.

He called after her uselessly. Stunned, he watched the little scurrying figure vanish along the broken road toward the botanical gardens, wishing that he could follow her and solace her, cursing himself for ever having thought of showing her the book.

III

Lunch was over and General Hill had taken the floor.

"Gentlemen, while we're awaiting the occupants' awakening or until we decide we've waited long enough, we must learn all we can. If they awake and decide to leave, we'll at least have obtained specific knowledge of how *one* spaceship works!

"We've only a vague suspicion of how the propulsion mechanism operates. But fortunately we've found equipment very similar to ours. Simpler in some respects.

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Probably worked *from* transistors instead of *to* them.

"The electronics men may have a free hand except for the bulkhead instrument. We'd better not tinker there until we're reasonably sure we know what we're doing. It may spell life or death to the crew. Some may prefer to study the books which we found," he added thoughtfully. "If so, speak up!"

"I would," Winthrop cut in. "I'd like Rabin and Norris to join me."

"An electronics engineer should round out the group," General Hill said. "Okay, Lizio. Now, gentlemen, shall we go?"

Rabin was a practicing psychologist with a strong background in semantics, linguistics, astronomy and a half-dozen other curiously diversified sciences. Yet, as Winthrop looked at him again, there was doubt—not as to Rabin's capability, but as to his *dependability?*

Was it some sense of inward nervousness, something contained in himself which he could not tolerate in others?

Rabin was studying the horribly graphic pictures as though each were a major work of art. Winthrop saw in the man's dark eyes something that had been in the little girl's eyes. He looked away.

The other men he felt more sure of. Norris—a top physicist at White Sands, thoroughly familiar with man's attempts at space flight. Lizio, an electronics engineer, with an alert, intelligent face, and excellent reputation.

Reassured by their competence he joined them as they bent over the larger volume. They found upon each drawing what certainly indicated a scale. Preceding the last, persistently identical symbol was a tailless arrow pointing left. They quickly named the last symbol "scale" and the arrow "equals."

"I'll do some measuring," Lizio said, and left. Winthrop and Norris began listing the various symbols, noting their frequency of appearance and relative positions.

An hour later Lizio returned, and began comparing his measurements with symbols on the drawings.

"They're definitely drawn to different scales," he said. "The symbols and measurements are not alike. That means different identifiable numbers. Lads, we can crack the math!"

They arrived at a unit, found that one hundred ninety-six units equaled slightly less than one meter, and from the precisely-marked drawings managed to label the symbols from one to fourteen. The fifteen symbol proved to be a fourteen followed by a one.

They were interrupted then as the book was taken to the Astoria signal center for photostating. They talked, while General Hill telephonically cut red tape to

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have computers rushed to them.

Suddenly Rabin cried, "I know the ship's point of origin!"

He displayed the book's centerspread, a beautiful skyscape from the plundered planet's surface. The stars and constellations seemed unfamiliar at first, but as Rabin remarked their luminosities and relative positions Norris exclaimed, "Of course—*Sirius!*"

Winthrop's troubled mind soared. Sirius! Over two and a half parsecs, eight and a half light years from the Solar System. Small wonder the crew was in a big sleep!

Knowledge of the ship's apparent point of origin kindled a deeper fire—the necessity to find out what they could *while* they could. Even if the ship's occupants proved friendly they just might be firmly reticent.

The computers came, and an intense Benton Allan and his associates—a young man who immediately buried his thin, bespectacled nose in the math, and bent his thin frame to the instruments.

The ship swarmed with technicians. Engineers examined the gyros and swore without hesitation that they could be duplicated. Others studied the electronics computer tied into the bulkhead instrument and its related schematics, or huddled excitedly with astronomers and spatiologists.

One by one they tied the schematics and drawings to the instruments and equipment, at length realizing that nothing in the volume related to the ship forward of the bulkhead.

They'd been talking it over.

"If you were in a spaceship," Winthrop said, "you'd certainly keep on hand the mechanics of what keeps your living quarters livable. There'll be another book up forward."

They left it at that.

Winthrop realized that with men here to whom math was sustenance, the sought-after answers might well be attained more quickly if he did not try to help further. As he went out, his gaze swept Rabin. The man's face was still drawn and pale in silent, fascinated study of the picture book.

The ship again. In the bright sunlight Winthrop asked questions while study of the stern went on apace. The bow retained its mystery. The many electronic listening devices attached forward had not recorded one decibel of sound.

In his mind the thought raced again: *Was there something lurking in the bow—something the little girl and Rabin had sensed —some unspeakable horror from the stars?*

He sought the general.

"Bert, what about the bulkhead door?" he asked. "Are we going to open it?"

"Not immediately," General Hill replied. "The occupants will, if alive, probably come out in

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their own way and time. If we try to break in prematurely we may bring on their deaths."

His face grew somber. "It's a problem. The ship drifted down as if with a dead man's hand at the helm. It didn't come at that speed from origin. Someone or something cut its speed when it hit our atmosphere. Had it come in fast the hull would have heated, and the occupants would have been roasted alive.

"Let's not force the issue. If alive they'll come out eventually. Meanwhile we're learning."

But can we wait? Winthrop thought. *Are we sensible in waiting?*

IV

Night. Benton Allan beckoned Winthrop to his side.

"You're familiar with Einstein's math, George. What do you think of this?"

Winthrop studied the recorded results with mounting trepidation. "Similar processes. The end result will probably be E equals MC_2!"

"Which explains the reactor and the fission bomb. We've cracked their math, George!"

Lizio came in at a half-run then, his eyes excited, proud with discovery.

"Gentlemen," he said quickly, "we could duplicate everything electronic if the ship soared away this minute! I guess we all thought we'd come across a product of a vastly more intelligent race. But their science is not superior to ours except in application. It found anti-gravity, for one thing!"

He nodded, then went on quickly. "Something, however, puzzles us. There's either a draftsman's error, or a technician's error. One circuit leading forward should be connected to a junction box on the main power dynamo. Instead, it's connected to one of the gyro assemblies. Its function was undoubtedly intended to transmit a pulse to activate some mechanism forward, probably to arouse the crew. It probably acted on the anti-gravity apparatus instead, slowing the ship practically to a standstill and letting it drift in with the crew unawakened.

"The circuit's forward connections is in the bulkhead instrument which is in part an autopilot/computer. We found a punched tape which we believe spelled *Destination: Earth,* and should also have led to activation of the awakening apparatus.

"Allan can work on the related math. I've identified it with the schematics. Then perhaps we'll be convinced that we must correct the wiring and arouse the crew."

General Hill snapped from the doorway, "Lizio, we can't be hasty. We must not only correlate everything you electronics men find and everything the com-

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puters reveal, but re-check our findings ten times over. Incidentally, copies of the book and details of our findings have been flown to the Bureau of Standards. They're busy on it, too.

"If the crew is dead, delay won't matter. If they've been in suspended animation across eight plus light years, delay shouldn't matter either—to them or to us! We can't try to be rescuers and wind up murderers by mistake!"

Three hours later Benton Allan came again from the computers.

"It's undoubtedly anti-gravity," he announced. "I've done considerable work on magnetic lines of force and theoretical work on possible creation of force fields for use as meteor screens. This math weaves in and out of mine like a pulse across a synchroscope. I'd been incredibly close to anti-gravity myself! That one blasted equation! Amazing!

"Lizio has been working with others on the autopilot computer. They suspected it was oriented off the galactic hub and the math verifies it. Doctor Englander from Palomar plotted courses to various star systems with the hub as reference point, and Lizio had the instrument punching tape from Englander's data.

"The unit not only plots courses to any star system in the galaxy, but apparently to any planet of any system! How could the memory bank have been developed? Have they better equipment for probing and photographing distant space? Have they known space travel for millenia and explored and catalogued the galaxy?

"Now, gentlemen, I hate to provoke a heated discussion but the computers back me up. The amount of anti-gravitational energy produced should drive the ship at over twenty times light-speed!"

"Wait, Al," Winthrop said. "Certainly Einstein's whole theory of—"

"You wait," Allan said with tired exasperation. "This math doesn't parallel Einstein's as we first thought! The differences I haven't determined. *The* computers have done that. They do in minutes what it would take years for me to compute. Perhaps you're faster!"

General Hill said sharply, "No arguments, please! Standards will double check. All the computers won't err, if these do. Let's assume these haven't erred. What does it mean, then?"

"That the ship came from Sirius in about half an Earth year," Winthrop said. "That it may have departed after *they* realized from visually observing our first atomic blast that there must be life here, probably a haven for *them*."

Englander laughed. "So they fled the beasties! Don't take your comics so seriously, George!"

"Are you sure it's a comic?"

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Winthrop snapped back. "Ask Rabin what *he* thinks!"

And Rabin screamed—

Shocked, the memory of the little girl's hysteria strong in him, Winthrop spun toward Rabin, and found the man's dark face suddenly vacuous. Rabin's hands were spread out, clutching the table's edge. His eyes were blank, blind.

"Rabin!" Winthrop yelled. He slapped the man's face stingingly. The dark head rocked, but the expression did not change.

A doctor administered a sedative and took Rabin away, silent, stumbling in a trance provoked, it seemed, by concentrated study of pictures too vividly drawn in some extra-solar abyss of depravity.

Benton Allan returned to the computers. Winthrop followed. There was much in Winthrop's mind then that he had still to rationalize.

At length he whispered, *"Al* —" and it was urgent then. "There's more to the ship than we suspect. To the books, too. I'm not sure about Rabin. He may have been on the verge of a breakdown. The book may have simply contributed. I don't know. It's hard to be sure.

"I'm just getting over a breakdown myself. I studied the book, and I haven't had a decent moment's rest since the ship came. But I haven't cracked. Be that as it may, there's something wrong in all this, Al. Whatever you find from this point on, let me know about it first, *please!"*

Allan turned quickly from the computer, peering owlishly over his glasses. "Why, George?" He searched Winthrop's tense face.

"A crazy hunch, Al. Just let me know."

"I will," Allan promised. "But, damn it, man, stop giving me the creeps!"

V

It was nearly midnight but no one moved toward his cot. Most of those who had witnessed Rabin's collapse could not sleep. Winthrop himself felt he would never sleep again.

General Hill came from the telephone. "Rabin's resting comfortably," he said. "His personal physician confirms Doctor Vigderman's suspicion that he'd been receiving psychiatric treatment. The casualty, then, is a normal one. It might have happened anywhere, any time. We can't attribute it to some baleful, alien influence."

What about the little girl? Winthrop was tempted to ask. *Surely there was no imbalance there?*

"Now," the general said, dismissing the tragedy of Rabin from his mind, "let's sum up. We've progressed beautifully. We have anti-gravity here, and proof that the speed of light *can* be exceeded.

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Standards fully verifies Allan's findings.

"Tomorrow, those most eminently qualified should try to determine how the bulkhead door may be opened. The General Staff has just ordered that it must be opened within forty-eight hours. All precautions will of course be taken to obviate damage to the ship."

"How about to *us?*" Winthrop asked sharply.

The general ignored him. "Now let's call it a day. You all must be as tired as I am."

"Stick with me, Al," Winthrop whispered urgently. Aloud he said, "Doctor Allan and I would like to go over the data now. We believe we've found the key to the door and that—"

The general laughed. "If you're that close, George, it can wait until morning."

"I disagree," Winthrop cut in sharply. "Time may be of the essence. How do we know whether the occupants are of the pastoral race or the other race depicted in that ghastly comic book? If they've anti-gravity and fission bombs, what else may they have up forward?"

"Let's not be pessimistic," General Hill said. "If they had come meaning harm, they'd have set their awakening apparatus properly. They'd not have erred if they'd come with evil intent. Let's not drag in a monstrous hint of invasion. If you wish to keep on, well and good. I'm for the cot. Goodnight, gentlemen!"

VI

"Why can't it wait, George?" Benton Allan asked tiredly.

"You'd better let me ask the questions!" Winthrop urged. "You said you understood that autopilot/computer. Do you think we could send the ship back?"

"Yes," Allan said. "The tape can be reversed. The computer would compensate for elapsed time and orbital factors."

"Will you help me?"

Slowly Allan removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "That would be the height of stupidly. We've a workable spaceship here. If we sent it back without awaiting the awakening of its occupants we'd be acting like congenital idiots!"

"Put your glasses back on!" Winthrop said irritably. His right forefinger stabbed at the schematics, drawings, translated math. "Add it up, Mister Computer!"

For a long moment Allan stared in silence. Then, suddenly, realization blanched his face. "The trees for the forest," he murmured. "Let's go, George!"

The sentry halted them at the ship's port, but passed them quickly when they told him their mission was urgent. But as they entered the ship they heard him calling for the officer-of-the-day.

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Allan attacked the autopilot/computer, inserting the reversed tape carefully. Winthrop with utmost care rearranged the wiring in accordance with the construction charts, and replaced everything else as it had been on the ship's arrival.

"Agreed?" Winthrop asked.

"Agreed!" said Benton Allan.

They left the ship hurriedly, fastening the port securely behind them. A moment later their triumph came. It was not a triumph to the general. In stunned horror and desperation, he watched the gleaming ship lift silently, slowly into the cool night air over Flushing Meadow Park, a monstrous silver gourd stippled with starlight.

"What have you done, man?" he cried.

"We sent it back, Bert," Winthrop said with a calmness he had not felt in years.

"But why? *Why?* What in God's name shall I tell the General Staff?"

"The simple truth," Winthrop told him. "We reviewed the data and reached an inescapable conclusion. Bert, when it came, the disarranged circuitry cut into the anti-gravity mechanism and landed it safely, as we suspected. Had it been wired properly, something forward would have been awakened. I'm sure of that!

"The math explained the autopilot/computer, the anti-gravity mechanism, the reactor, the fission bomb—and *something sinister!*

"The history book—*not* comic book—showed where the ship originated, and it also showed clearly who launched it. The math is based on fourteen symbols. The invaders in the history book have seven-fingered hands, the pastoral folk five!"

Steadily Winthrop returned the general's stare. "I shouldn't have said 'ship'! It wasn't designed for passengers or crew. We thought the forward portion wasn't described. But it was—in the same equations that explained the reactor and the fission bomb!

"We use fission bombs to detonate fusion bombs. The *missile's* warhead contains a fusion bomb which the math proves would have caused a spontaneous carbon chain reaction which would almost instantaneously have wiped out the Earth! Through a technician's error it came to Earth a dud. Its launchers will never know that. It will be *back where it belongs* twenty times quicker than the light now leaving Sol—and it's no longer a dud!"

They all were silent then.

You licked it, Winthrop told himself, *when you armed the greatest bomb.*

Verification of classification came almost nine years later. Then a flareup of near-nova intensity was noted in Sirius, the finest photographs being obtained by Englander in New Palomar Observatory on Pluto.

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under observation

by . . . Evan Hunter

The Martians were appalled—and no wonder! Their captives babbled like demented savages, and yet had seemingly mastered atomic energy!

THE MARTIANS stood behind the wide plexoid sheet that encircled their captives. They did not converse much, and when they did, it was in hushed, solemn whispers. The loudspeakers on the walls brought the voices of their captives to them. They listened and shook their heads, and then watched again.

"It's no use, Profne," Cordolane said.

He gestured to his companion, and both men walked toward the small door at the far end of the observation room. They emerged into the corridor, the heels of their boots clicking hollowly on the checkerboard-tiled floors.

Cordolane shook his head all the way to his office, mumbling tonelessly. Profne held open the door for him, and he entered, walking rapidly to his desk.

"That's that," he said.

"Yes," Profne agreed.

"And I'm stymied. Damned if I'm not!"

"It *is* confusing," Profne said.

"Suppose you tell me how that group of incoherent idiots ever managed to fathom nuclear energy. Suppose you tell me that."

Although Evan Hunter is a comparatively new star in the science fiction firmament he has earned his laurels in the brilliant way—by appearing overnight in many magazines. Now he has presented for your entertainment a little gem of a story, its every facet scintillating with brittle irony.

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"I'm afraid I can't, sir," Profne said.

"No, I didn't think you could. Nor can I." He shook his head again. "Did you see them, Profne? Did you observe them closely?"

"I did, sir. It was disturbing!"

"Schizophrenic, largely. Some paranoids mixed in among them, but largely schizophrenic."

"I would have said manic-depressive, sir."

"Yes, yes, that too. Good Lord, what a society, what a culture! Fifteen of them as a sampling, and each a babbling idiot."

"And cruel, sir."

"Ah, so you noticed that. Did you see the way the big blond one constantly shoved at the ill one with the shaved head? And the way the big brute kicked the poor devil when he fell to the floor—repeatedly?"

"Yes, it was horrible, sir."

Cordolane shook his head again. "Did you hear the way they spoke? It was nonsense, sheer nonsense. And the way they ran one moment, and were restive the next? The way they jumped, and slapped, and giggled, and laughed, and shouted at nothing whatever?"

"Rest assured—I took it all in, sir!"

"As if the entire thing were a lark. I mean—picture Martians in the same position. A strange drops right into their little enship drops out of the skies. It closure, captures a band of them, and takes them to a strange planet. Instead of a normal reaction, they pretend it's a great game they're enjoying immensely. Can you picture Martians behaving in such an incredible fashion?"

"Sir, we cannot impose normal behavior standards upon a group that is obviously mentally ill."

"I realize that. But it is a shame. Physically, they're beautiful specimens. Beautiful! And we thought Earth would be the answer."

"There are other planets, sir."

"Yes, but Earth is so close. We can't shrug off the nuclear explosions—unless our instruments were wrong. There was every evidence of an advanced culture. I thought surely we would do it this time. I thought surely there would be an exchange of intelligence, a new era, a golden age . . ." He cut himself short with a burst of humorless laughter. "It's almost ironic. They're idiots—every one of them."

"Every action, every behavior pattern confirms it," Profne agreed. "The chanting, the meaningless songs, the spontaneous dancing, the malicious cruelty of it all!"

"Well, there's no sense in crying over spilt milk. There's only one thing to do."

"What's that, sir?"

"Return them. Dispatch a ship at once, and take them back to

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where we found them. That at least makes sense. We don't want them."

Sucking in a deep breath, Cordolane expanded his chest and stretched himself to his full height of thirty-three inches.

"You'd better do that at once, Profne," he said.

JERRY BAKER dialed the number anxiously, and listened to the phone ringing on the other end. At last, the receiver was lifted, and someone said, "Sergeant Hannigan speaking—Third Precinct."

"I'd like to talk to Detective-Sergeant Edwards, please," Jerry said.

"All right. Hold on a moment."

Baker waited, drumming with his fingers on the instrument.

"Edwards speaking." The voice came loud and sharp.

Baker cleared his throat. "Sergeant Edwards, this is Jerry Baker. They're *all* back, sir."

"Just who is this?" he asked.

"Jerry Baker. I called a little while ago, sir. Remember? About the missing . . ."

"Oh, yes. And you say they're all back now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's wonderful. Guess they just wandered off, or something, eh?"

"I don't know, sir. But they're back now! That's what counts. Fifteen of them, and all safe."

"Well, fine, fine. Let me just mark that down here so we can close the case. What was your name again?"

"Baker, sir. Jerry Baker."

"And the outfit?"

"Baker's—that's B-A-K-E-R—Baker's Nursery School." Jerry paused, and smiled. "Er . . . if you have any children, sir, we do a wonderful job. Our rates are low, too, depending on the age of the child. We don't take them over five, though, so if you. . . ."

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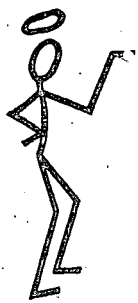

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no star's land

by . . . William Morrison

When cosmic giants wage war man becomes a fly-speck in space. But a single atom can shatter a sun!

IT WAS RIDICULOUS and incredible. It was against all reason. But it had happened. The ship was marooned in free space.

They had been squabbling again, and this time the arguments on both sides had become as hot as the two blazing stars which hemmed them in on both sides, making them feel like dust motes in a vacuum. Karin, her eyes darting sparks, had summed it up neatly.

"It's hopeless, Jan. Only a divorce can solve it!"

"I can't think of anything I want more," Jan said, his face tight with anger. By the light of the green star, which illuminated his features, he must have made, he realized bitterly, a ghastly picture.

Karin regarded him with distaste. "Fine—splendid! The minute we get back to Earth."

"Why wait that long?" Jan protested. "There's a court on Ganymede. We can get one there."

He was bitterly contemplating the ruin of his honeymoon when he noticed that the ship had lost headway. The differential screen, which depicted the change in the

William Morrison is a past master of the 'mistake' story. We don't mean to imply that Mr. Morrison made a mistake in writing this story—quite the contrary! The 'mistake' story is simply a tale that in relentless documentary fashion shows how foolish people are to confuse size with power, or make the error of underselling the indomitable spirit of man.

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star picture from second to second, was barely illuminated. They were practically stationary with respect to every star in the local galaxy.

In view of the fact that they had been traveling at one-half light speed, and that neither the green nor the yellow star was more than thirty-five million miles away, the result seemed to Jan outrageous. The positions of both stars should have been changing rapidly. His first thought was that the differential screen was no longer working.

Both stars, however, were stationary on the direct view screen as well, glowing with unsurpassed steadiness, and filling the space around them with a flood of radiance. The direct view screen was plainly operating properly. Somehow, the unwilling conclusion forced itself upon him that they had been braked to a stop.

Karin noticed his agitation and demanded, "What's wrong?" And then she stared herself, realizing what had happened. Her lips trembled and she gave a startled exclamation: "But that's impossible!"

"Of course it's impossible," he agreed, the green and yellow beams cascading over his face as he crossed to the other side of the ship. "Not only that we should have decelerated so rapidly, but that we failed to notice what was happening. I remember that it was just a half-hour ago that I checked the screens, and you made that brilliant remark about my ability as a navigator."

His tone made clear all over again how much he had resented her criticism. "We were going full speed, over ninety thousand miles a second on initial drive alone. Thirey minutes later, our velocity is reduced to zero."

The differential screen, he noted, was now completely dark. "We've been subjected on an average to a negative acceleration of fifty miles per second," he went on quickly. "More than seven thousand gravs! It should have torn both us, and the ship apart. But the ship shows no strain, and *we* haven't felt a thing."

There was a moment's silence. Then Karin said huskily, "Our instruments are all wrong."

"They're not." Jan insisted. "A direct view through the visiplates proves they're not." Karin didn't reply, and he added angrily. "Go ahead and say it again. You're thinking it, anyway. I'm a lousy navigator. I'm the one who insisted on passing *between* the stars."

"I wasn't thinking that at all," she said slowly. "I was wondering. What could have caused this to happen? Offhand, I couldn't even make a reasonable guess. Shall we try using our power?"

"What would be the use?" Jan said. "Even with the degravitizer on to protect us, we can't get up

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more than one hundred g's. We can't overcome a reverse acceleration of seven thousand."

"Suppose we reverse direction."

Jan nodded, and said, "We'll try that."

Slowly and carefully he swung the ship around, and began to build up speed. The maneuver claimed his full attention, giving him no time to look at Karin, and wonder whether or not she was frightened.

It was a stupid situation to be caught in, and from beginning to end Jan had no one to blame but himself. It was a few years before that Intergalactic Exploration had started a new practice, thought up apparently by some elderly Romeo in his second childhood. It was a special service for honeymooners.

What did honeymooners, from time immemorial, want for themselves? Privacy, isolation—freedom from intrusion by the outside world. What did Intergalactic have to offer the intrepid volunteers who did its exploration? Just that—complete privacy in space. It was all in the way you looked at it. The isolation most people hated was precisely what the honeymooners sought.

It had seemed like a bright idea to combine a boon to the honeymooners with a favor to Intergalactic. Intergalactic had offered ships—shiny, beautiful ships of the latest exploratory model, capable of a subspeed of half-light, and for stellar travel with a secondard range up to a hundred light years. Each was completely supplied with food, and furnished with all the gadgets that made shipboard housekeeping a pleasure. And all this was free of charge to properly trained couples possessed of a reasonable mental stability, and a suitably technical background.

There was no salary, of course—after all, the ship itself was reward enough. In return, each couple was given a restricted section of a galaxy to explore. The task was not difficult. Professional explorers could have carried out their assignments in three months. The honeymoon couples were allowed twice that time.

As the man who had suggested the idea observed, their scientific interests were likely to be somewhat impaired for a short period, and they might be expected to waste many hours in non-productive pursuits.

If they hadn't been so much in love with each other, Jan and Karin wouldn't have been such fools as to take on a double assignment. They had accepted a sector of twice the usual size, and they had explored it well, but in leisurely fashion. A year had passed, and in that year they had learned to know each other *too* well.

It was too long to be together, isolated from the rest of the human race. Even for honey-

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mooners, far too long. Jan was aware of every one of Karin's weaknesses—and he realized only too well that she was aware of his.

They had, moreover, developed new weaknesses they had never before exhibited. Stubbornness, impatience, a tendency to find incessant fault—these were the beginning of a process of falling out of love.

In Karin's eyes, he knew he was no longer the tall self-reliant man in whose slightly ugly face she had found the good looks that appealed to her. And to Jan, Karin was no longer the warm-hearted pretty girl who, he had been so pleasantly surprised to learn, was so ready to understand him.

During the past month they had become bored with each other. During the past week they had been in an almost continuous state of open hostility.

It was the desire to keep their trip from dragging out even more intolerably that had induced Jan to take a short cut. The most direct path home lay between the yellow and green stars, bright twins which were separated from each other by a distance of forty million miles.

Each star was of the same approximate sun-mass, and the radiation was strong. But their radiation shield was effective. Their possible acceleration, along with the momentum they had already acquired, should have been sufficient to keep them from falling victim to either star.

All that was needed was a steady hand at the controls. With careful navigation they should have been able to pass midway between the two massive bodies without suffering any ill effects.

Karin, whether from caution or from a mere feeling of opposition to everything that Jan suggested, had vigorously opposed the idea. She preferred to swing wide of both stars, even though it meant a serious time loss—not so much because of the added mileage, but because of the need for transverse acceleration, followed by careful maneuvering to get back to their course again. But her opposition hadn't been quite vigorous enough, and Jan had succeeded in winning her over.

They had never expected what happened next. Their path had neatly bisected the line joining the two stars, and they had begun to put both glowing masses behind them. Unexpectedly, as if they had reached the end of a great rubber band to which they had been attached, they had stopped dead in space. The rubber had stretched as much as it was ever going to stretch.

Then, as Jan reversed direction, it seemed as if the band were contracting once more. They picked up speed, and the differential screen glowed green and yellow while their position with respect to the twin stars underwent a

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change. But the glow quickly dimmed and vanished. Once more they had come to a full stop.

"Road blocked at both ends," said Jan, with grim finality.

"Suppose we cut off at right angles," suggested Karin.

"Naturally," he agreed. "We can't afford to miss a bet."

But the road was blocked above and below as well. Jan said, "I'm afraid, darling, that our divorce is going to be held up."

"Indefinitely."

She looked a little pale and frightened. Even the ghastly lighting could not conceal the beauty in her face, and at that moment he loved her again. He said, "Go ahead and say it. Tell me I should have listened to you. It's true, you know."

"I'm not reproaching you, Jan," she said quietly. "Don't joke about it. It's too serious."

"We're unharmed. We should be thankful for that, I guess."

"How long will we be safe? We can't move."

"Strictly speaking," he said, "we can. We can't get away, but we can wriggle around a bit. Apparently we can travel a few million miles in any direction perpendicular to the line joining the stars. We could probably also travel directly toward either star, although I'd hate to get any closer to them. Unfortunately, the stars won't *let* us get away."

"Are you sure it's the stars? There might be planets with intelligent living creatures on them."

"That's out!" said Jan firmly. "Take a look at some of the three-dimensional views I snapped, both as we approached, and as we were wriggling around. Taking all the pictures into consideration, I must have covered all the space for at least a billion miles from either star. There are no planets."

Together they stared at the photographs. Karin suggested: "There might be small ones, little bigger than asteroids. Let's put the pictures under the analyzer."

They did. The analyzer showed an asteroid belt four hundred million miles out from the center of the double star system. But none of the asteriods was apparently more than five miles in diameter.

"No planets," Jan reiterated. "And if there are any living creatures on those asteroids, I doubt whether they'd be close enough to affect us. It's pretty obvious that the forces holding us together come from the stars themselves."

"Then you think the forces are natural? I've never heard of anything of the kind before."

"The forces would *have* to be natural."

"How about living things on the stars themselves?" asked Karin.

"I don't believe it. Not for a moment. I know there's been talk about flame creatures living at temperatures of millions of de-

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grees centigrade. But nobody has ever met them."

"Jan, what do we do?"

"You tell me. We have an excellent radiation shield system. But we can't keep it going indefinitely. And sooner or later, our food concentrates will run out."

"So we're stuck here. Hopelessly marooned."

"Right. Too bad we're so bored with each other."

Karin said nothing, and once more Jan turned to the controls, hoping against hope. But no matter in which direction he made his attempt, the ship was quickly brought up short. The rubber band had not weakened.

The hours passed, while the two stars continued to blaze at them, watchful and unwinking. Jan adjusted the radiation controls, permitting some of the heat that escaped direct reflection from the polished sides to get past the shielding screen, and warm the ship.

On the whole, as it took some of the load from the screen and lengthened the system's useful life, it was a wise move. But it did make the ship uncomfortable. Karin, he noted, was bearing up well. There were no complaints from her, and it was she who suggested that they put themselves on emergency rations.

It was at the end of thirty hours of their strange imprisonment that they began to be aware of dangers other than those from radiation and hunger. Both the green star and the yellow, as Jan had observed, possessed fairly small coronas. Quite unexpectedly, the green star flared up, and tongues of garish flame licked out for a distance of several million miles. Its action set off a silent uproar in space.

The yellow star answered with flame of its own, and Jan was forced to get into the act, and turn on his radiation shields at full capacity. A half-hour later, both coronas subsided to normal, and he cut down his shield capacity once more.

"It's damnably disturbing," said Jan. "If only natural forces are involved, why should one star reply to the other in such deliberate fashion?"

"Perhaps the green star set the other one off, like a neutron from an exploding atom setting off the next atom," Karin suggested.

"Or perhaps there are living creatures on them," Jan muttered.

Karin said, "It's beginning to seem possible. And I'm afraid that if we stay here long enough, we'll find out."

"I'm afraid so too," Jan conceded. "We both wanted living companions—but not unknown shapes of fire."

Seventeen hours after the end of the corona explosions, they noticed activity on the yellow star. What took place resembled the formation of sunspots, but the

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eruptions were like none they had ever seen. As they grew, they darkened, and began to rotate with increasing speed, so that soon the surface of the yellow star was covered with black, whirling specks. The specks drew together, and then shot out abruptly toward the green star.

Once more Jan acted. As the black objects raced toward him, he sent the ship full speed ahead to get out of their way, and as he did so the now elongated spheres of spinning blackness sailed straight past the ports. They were in the vacuum of space, but even so Jan noted that the ship rocked as if battered by the waves of an ocean.

From the green star came answering black objects, which grew like sinister soap bubbles. The bubbles caught the attacking spheres, and wherever defenders and attackers made contact, a blinding flash of light was followed by a quick burst of high-energy radiation.

"Rule out natural forces," said Jan decisively.

Karin nodded. "Each star is either alive, or has living things on it. They're fighting a war." She repeated the word. "A *war*. It seems incredible—terrifying."

"I'm afraid you've forgotten our own past. Haven't you studied your history? We had wars once too."

"But so long ago, Jan! It seems impossible to believe that half the human race ever tried to destroy the other half."

"Well, they didn't succeed. There's no use moralizing. Now, at least, we have something pretty definite to go on. When the creatures of one star launched a force field, those of the other star defended themselves with a force field of their own. Directly between the stars, the fields balance pretty well, permitting us to move. But toward the rim of the region where they collide, the forces work in the same direction, and keep us from breaking free."

"Now that we know that—what can we do?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," admitted Jan. "Neither star will relax its field for fear of falling victim to the other. That leaves us in the middle, exactly as before."

He said thoughtfully, "Karin, did I ever tell you of that ancient history book I once saw? It actually depicted our barbaric ancestors on a battlefield? There were long rows of trenches on either side, apparently as a protection from the primitive missiles they were capable of launching. And sitting on the blackened limb of a tree that had been shot almost to bits, in what was called 'No Man's Land', sat a bird.

"Well, we're that bird, Karin—on a battlefield we never made. We're right in the middle, in no star's land. And sooner or later, some of the weapons being used are going to finish us off, precisely

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as one of those ancient shells was sure eventually to destroy the bird."

"I didn't realize I had married a philosopher," said Karin sharply. "If the bird had any brains, it would have flown away. And if *we* have any brains, we'd find a way to move the ship."

"We seem to lack the necessary mental equipment," said Jan tartly. "What would you suggest?"

"That we go over the entire ship, make an inventory of all our instruments, and resources, and see if we can use them to get us out of here. Once we're headed for home we can philosophize as much as we please."

"You're right, of course," said Jan. "I don't see what we can possibly do on an effective scale. But, let's go!"

They put on a great show of activity, cataloguing the different varieties of storage products, instruments, and fuel. The list, Jan pointed out, was not impressive.

"We could, if we had the proper equipment, convert all our atomic fuel into a bomb," he said. "What effect that would have on a star that can radiate a billion times as much energy as we could throw at it, I don't know. I do know that it would leave us without fuel."

"And the creatures themselves —if there are any. How about them? Would they be destroyed?"

"They're used to tremendous gravity, incredible pressures and temperatures way up in the millions," Jan said. "Maybe the only way to harm them would be to *lower* those high values. That overgrown corona we saw might have been a pressure reducer. The black things were probably heat absorbers."

"Our radiation shield—" suggested Karin eagerly.

"Something like that *might* do the trick—if it were a trillion times as large. It would absorb the energy they need and scatter it as low frequency radiation. But a small shield system like this one wouldn't amount to more than a single drop of water thrown on a fire. We're too small, Karin. On this battlefield, we're *outclassed.*"

"Then all we can do is wait to be picked off?"

"I'm sorry, Karin. If I have to go, this isn't the way I'd like it to end. I dreamed of sacrificing my life for you, so that you'd always remember me as a man of courage and integrity. As it is—" he shrugged.

"Don't be silly," said Karin, moved in spite of herself. "I have no desire to outlive you."

They were reduced to waiting again. Jan wondered whether, in all the time they had hovered between the opposing battle lines, the star-dwellers had been conscious of their existence. Even whether they had spared the time to note the bird so hopelessly

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trapped on their battlefield. Each side, if it was alert to its enemy's moves, must have recorded the ship's presence, and possibly speculated on what it was doing in this section of space.

When the surface of the green star began to heave, Jan returned to his controls again, ready to maneuver out of the way of whatever weapon might be used. But this time, apparently, the change on the green star presaged no attack. A section of the surface moved slowly out, and then broke up into wriggling fragments that exhibited a peculiar order. Curiously, the figures reminded him of some of the primitive alphabets of early human civilization.

"Sky writing!" exclaimed Karin.

"Space writing," he corrected. "Intended for us, or for the enemy?"

"Not for us. They must realize that we can't read it."

"That's right. But if it's for them—it may be a suggestion for a truce!"

"Whatever it is, the yellow star's not answering," said Karin anxiously.

"Give them time, Karin. They have to make up their minds."

An hour later, the light from the yellow star died slowly away, and its size shrank. Then the star blazed up again, and expanded to twice its previous diameter.

As the yellow star swept through the phases of its powerful pulsation, Jan felt as if every bone and muscle of his body was in the grip of a giant hand, being twisted and wrenched without mercy. Karin's body stiffened, and he heard her cry out. The next moment, her body crumpled, and she sagged to the deck in a dead faint.

Jan started to crawl toward her, felt the giant hand close on his own brain, and blacked out.

When Jan awoke again, both stars seemed normal once more, blazing as steadily as when he had first seen them. Karin was awake too—sitting up with her hands pressed to her temples.

"Truce rejected," Jan said bitterly. "They don't care what happens to the bird on the battlefield, apparently."

"Perhaps we should edge closer to the one that wanted the truce," Karin whispered shakily.

Jan shook his head. "Let's not give either side the idea that we have any sympathies at all. Taking sides in a fight too big for us is a sure way to commit suicide."

His lips tightened. "We'd better get as far away as we can from both of them without using up too much of our fuel fighting their force fields. That at least will spare our radiation shield from too much strain."

"I still think we should get closer to the green one. At least its creatures aren't as bloodthirsty as the others appear to be."

"Neither one is bloodthirsty. Just *flamethirsty*," said Jan grimly.

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"And personally, I wouldn't trust the green sun as far as I could throw it."

The uneasy silence of space surrounded them again. Green star and yellow star shone quietly, their coronas as thin and bright as supernatural haloes. Small sunspots whirled on their surfaces—as they did on the surface of every well-behaved star of reasonably large mass. And within the ship, Jan and Karin waited with dread impatience for the next move in the unearthly war.

Jan tried to occupy himself by arranging the data of the systems they had surveyed, but most of the work had been done long before. There were several thousand tiny spool books, part of the ship's standard supply, which neither of them had as yet touched. But unfortunately he wasn't interested in reading.

If there had been something important to discuss, they would have spoken to each other. But they had long since passed the stage where small talk was possible. Even their meals, which on Earth might have dragged out pleasantly for an hour or two, were here of little value in killing time. Synthetics took only a few seconds to prepare, and no more than a few minutes to eat. Besides, they were on short rations.

They had long used up the small supply of alcoholic drinks with which a thoughtful Intergalactic supplied its vessels in order to ease the strain that might be expected at first between two comparative strangers thrown into such close intimacy for the first time in their lives. There was nothing for it but to remain sober.

All the same, there came a time when Jan began to wonder if he might not be drunk after all, his mind thrown hideously off balance, by the strange forces to which they had been subjected. The things he saw had a nightmare aspect which chilled him to the core of his being.

But Karin saw them too. The yellow star was undergoing a chance in shape. Slowly it was becoming longer and narrower, both ends maintaining the same distance from the green star. When a constriction appeared in the middle, it looked for all the world like a super-amoeba beginning to undergo mitosis, and he wondered if it was going to split, like the amoeba, into two bodies.

But the process came to a halt when the star had assumed the shape of a huge diabolical dumbell, two great spheres of flame held together by a narrow connecting link a mere two hundred thousand miles in diameter.

The green star began to reply. It too grew longer, but the shape became that of a super-spindle, the middle thickened, the ends sharpened. Jan became aware of currents of flame that raced from one end out into space and then around to the other end, where

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they were absorbed into the body of the star again. Two fantastic cosmic fencers were about to clash, one assuming the position of attack, the other apparently putting itself on guard.

"Wonder when the fun begins," Jan muttered.

"It won't be fun for us," said Karin grimly. Her hands clenched in sudden fury. "If we could only *do* something, instead of just standing here helpless, like—like —"

"A bird on a battlefield," said Jan helpfully. "But we've already gone over that, haven't we? They're too big for us. They have all the material advantages. They —" He broke off abruptly, his eyes narrowing. Startled, Karin waited for him to continue in sudden, desperate hope. "Material advantages," he went on slowly. "Yes, they have them. But spiritually—or rather, mentally—we're in the *same* boat. I think we can make something of that."

"I don't understand you," said Karin.

"I mean that they're as ignorant of us as we are of them. Perhaps they're even *more* ignorant. They know that we're small, and incapable of applying a force that could break out of the field surrounding us. They know we haven't been harmed by anything they've thrown at each other—so far. But I'll bet they can't examine the inside of this ship. I'll bet they can't tell what we look like, what intelligence we have.

"We know some of the things they can do, although not all. We know something of the fields of force they can exert. And we know that they must be creatures so different from us that any strange behavior on our part will seem to them potentially dangerous."

"You're philosophizing again," said Karin in disgust.

"No, I'm analyzing. Their ignorance of us will be our weapon. We're small, but there's no evidence we can't harm them. An atomic bomb is small too. And we're in a favorable psychological position. They're busy watching each other, waiting for each other's moves, with the initiative apparently on the side of the yellow star.

"If we act in any way to upset the present near-balance, they'll take us seriously. We may be the straw that breaks the camel's back, the tiny force that tips the balance one way or another."

"It's absurd," said Karin. "We're too small. We aren't big enough to be a straw. We're just a couple of molecules on the straw."

"But they don't know that! And even if they suspect it, they can't be sure. Because there's one material weapon we have that may be dangerous to them."

"Our radiation shield system!" Karin gasped.

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"Exactly. If it absorbed enough energy, it might upset plans for either attack or defense."

"They must know it's too weak to make any difference. If it were really powerful, they'd expect us to have used it before."

"No," said Jan. "They probably realize that we use it for just one purpose—to protect ourselves. We mustn't subject it to excess strain. But suppose we're desperate, and decide we're finished anyway. Suppose we make up our minds to take one of our enemies with us. Suppose we try to commit suicide on a really heroic scale."

Karin stared at him, her lips whitening. "If you really want to, Jan."

"I *don't* want to. But I want them to get that impression. Suppose I aim the ship at the yellow star, start all the motors, and turn on the radiation shield system to the limits of its capacity. Remember the state of uncertainty they're in anyway. What do you think they'll do?"

"I don't know."

"They'll *have* to do something. They just won't let us plunge into them."

"But what—?"

"That," said Jan grimly, "we'll find out. Whatever happens, it'll be better than waiting."

"You said that before when you took a chance passing between the two stars. Don't be in a hurry, Jan."

But Jan was already maneuvering the ship around. The radiation shield was on, and the motors were blasting more and more rapidly. They picked up speed.

With grim deliberation he aimed the nose of the ship at the center of one of the yellow spheres. Swiftly, the yellow dumbbell-shaped star grew in the direct vision plate, spreading a saffron glow over the differential visor. Yellow blotted out all the other colors of space. The vision screen began to glow not only with light, but with a faint heat of its own.

But the air in the rest of the ship had become cool. The radiation system was working beautifully, and the creatures on the yellow star must know that. The system would be shattered in the corona, vaporized in the star itself. But what harm might it not do before it died?

Jan shivered, without knowing whether it was from the drop in temperature, or from the growing fear that was overwhelming him. From the yellow star there came no move. Another few seconds, and the screen would begin to falter and fail. When that happened it would be too late to reverse the direction of the ship. It would plunge straight into the fiery mass.

He turned to Karin, and said hoarsely, "I'm sorry, darling, you were right after all. We should have waited."

"No, I couldn't have stood it

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any longer. It's better this way, Jan—"

Something struck the ship a great blow. Something sent them whirling end over end away from the yellow star. With the motors blasting away as strongly as they could, the ship was describing a great erratic arc, like a toy jet set off by a child, and tossed high into the air.

But there was no air here, nothing to brake the crazy spin. Yellow and green flashed in and out of the viewing screens, fainter and smaller each time. They were being hurled away from the twin stars with a constantly mounting velocity, a terrifying lurching and swaying.

Jan began to drag himself toward the controls, saw that Karin had already reached them. The ship was straightening out. At times it wobbled so violently that he was afraid of the strain on the hull. But the wobbling never persisted, always being transformed, just in time into another form of erratic spin.

Slowly their energy of rotation died away, absorbed by the anti-spin gyroscopes. When they straightened out, they were far past the barrier. Eighty million miles separated them from the two stars. Streamers of blackness were shooting from both ends of the green spindle toward the yellow dumbell, which had contracted sharply in an attempt to defend itself.

Jan took a deep breath. "We were lucky," he cried. "They were both under so much tension, they took me seriously. The yellow star diverted some of its forces to defend itself from me, and the green star used the occasion to head off the attack with a counter-attack of its own."

"I know!" Karin breathed.

"Shall we wait to see what happens?"

"No, Jan. Let's get away fast."

Karin was smiling at him, and Jan could not help smiling back at her. But he was aware of a tenseness of his own as he asked, with seeming casualness, "Still want that divorce?"

Karin said slowly, "We've got at least two weeks to go before we reach our own System. By that time I'll want it. But don't give it to me. Do you understand, Jan? Whatever happens, *refuse me a divorce.*"

"Those are orders?"

"Absolute orders. When we land on Earth, I'll take a vacation from you for about a month. After that we'll spend the rest of our lives together. But always with other people around."

"Always?"

"Almost always. At moments like this, I admit, other people would be in the way."

Green star and yellow star faded into the distance. The bird, thought Jan, had escaped from the battlefield. It was only natural for it to burst into song.

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the deadly ones

by . . . F. L. Wallace

He preyed on the nightmare fears of mankind, and the dread food he craved was his in abundance. Why, *why* did he have to go exploring?

RATHSDEN. I'm sure the name means nothing to you. There are legends, of course—from old Germany and the greater Reich, colonial America even. But you can't prove anything very damaging or concrete with legends. And even when the story is otherwise correct, I've been careful to keep my name out of it. A clever person shuns publicity, though it may involve tampering with history. For all practical purposes the name Rathsden is unknown. I want it kept that way.

I can't remember when the inspiration came. Probably it had lain for a long time dormant in the back of my mind, like a mole hibernating in mid-winter. Warmed by the proper circumstances, it emerged at last in its full vigor to claim my attention.

I've always worked hard, but lately what I got out of my efforts you couldn't call a living. The Red Cross was largely responsible. You could never get me to say a good word for that agency—never.

Still, I have made use of them, and in this case they made their

F. L. Wallace is one of the bright new stars of science fiction. He is also a practicing engineer who has designed hydraulic presses, and gyro instruments. Be warned! When he starts weaving sound science into the homespun geography of his native Illinois you may find yourself caught up in a spatial drive which will carry you clear across the great curve of the universe—on a journey guaranteed to chill and surprise you!

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contribution, though it was an unwitting one.

I gave the idea careful thought. From the beginning I knew I needed help. I'm not superhuman, not in the strict sense, though I suppose I could give a good account of myself against Well's Invisible Man, Homo Superior, or the new crop of mutants that will spring up some day soon.

I needed help, and I carried the problem to a council of my fellows. We discussed it thoroughly, and in the end, though they didn't give me their blessing, they consented to aid me.

The problem was flying saucers, or rather how to force one to land. We debated the matter for a long time, but there didn't seem to be any way to do it. No jet could keep up with a saucer and present rockets were equally inadequate. Besides, we didn't have access to any of these machines.

Someone in the back of the council, whose name I didn't catch suggested that, if we couldn't force one to land, perhaps we could lure one down. It didn't matter how, as long as it remained on the ground for an hour or so, with its ports open. The rest would be up to me.

"Fine," I said. "What do you propose?"

"They're investigating, you know," he said, "in the western part of the country. Rocket bases, atom bomb sites, anything that indicates advanced technology. Let's give them another menace."

"Sounds good. What are they interested in?" He was a hard fellow to locate and I didn't try to visualize his face. He came from Ireland I believe.

"A spaceship," he said. "A very formidable creation, with an incredible drive."

There was nothing wrong with the basic concept. The ship wouldn't be real of course. It would merely seem real from the air. We could accomplish that.

As for the drive, we could manage that too. In a little investigated part of the spectrum we could create a low and steady output, suggesting that the drive was idling, ready for instant takeoff.

None of this was impossible for us.

We? Have I said that we're not human? We've existed for a long time on earth beside Homo Sapiens, and he has only dimly guessed that we are here. The ordinary limitations of men don't apply to us.

A few of us working together could create an illusionary spaceship, and an intriguing drive to go with it. This was something flying saucers couldn't resist. They'd come down when they found they couldn't investigate from their customary high level flights.

I nodded at the fellow I couldn't see. "Excellent. However, when the saucer lands you'll have to maintain the illusion. Logistics are involved too."

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"That's easy," he said. "But what if it isn't manned by robots as you've assumed? You can get inside all right, but a living creature will discover you."

I looked at the blank spot where I thought he might be. "Really now. It *has* to be a robot. No living creature, except us, can stand the accelerations we've observed."

"But what if we're wrong?" he persisted.

"In that case we'll have time for one quick look," I said. "If it *is* living and we're no match for it, we'll run like hell."

There was general laughter and the fellow raised no further objections. For all I know, he went home. The meeting broke up and everyone except a few volunteers left. We continued to discuss ways and means.

When the plans seemed foolproof, I got up. "Just a minute." Another fellow I didn't recognize interposed. "Suppose everything works the way you say it will. The saucer lands, and you succeed in getting inside. What makes you think it will go back to the home planet?"

"Don't overlook our fake spaceship," I said. "If the robot investigator from the saucer found a real spaceship, that would be important information. It would be important enough to warrant a quick trip back to the local base, wherever that may be situated.

"But when the robot can't locate anything, in spite of the evidence on the instruments, it will be dealing with *top priority* stuff. Logically it will have to report back to the prime evaluation center, on the home planet. I think I'm safe in anticipating a short journey."

"I hope so." He shook his head dubiously. "But what about us? We don't have to worry about humans, and probably those things out there haven't come close enough to learn about us. But they're pretty advanced. What if they should?"

"You think they can detect us when we're dematerialized?" I smiled. "Don't be naive. Anyway, nothing risked, you know."

I shouldn't have said that. I talk too much. "Nothing gained." He completed the sentence for me. He didn't look altruistic. "Just what do we stand to gain?"

The others hadn't thought of it, and neither had I, from that angle. I ad-libbed. "It's not been good here lately. There's too many factors against us, agencies that I don't have to mention.

"Feast or famine, mostly the last. And what are we going to do after an atomic war, when mutants come along? Are you sure we can compete with them? As bad as it is now, it can get worse." I paused to let the dire predictions sink in.

"Someone has to do it, and I intend to be the one to find new worlds for us," I said.

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My confidence impressed the others, but not the heckler. "I can see that you'll find it for yourself. But how are you going to let us know?"

"Just now I can't communicate from here to Philadelphia," I said. "It's a harassing business, merely trying to stay alive. Here I haven't had time to practice mental communication. But there conditions will be ideal and I expect to develop myself so that I can reach out anywhere in the galaxy."

Objectively that was true. Subjectively I could have changed my mind about sharing my prize. They didn't think of that and I didn't mention it.

The last objection was silenced. They went about their preparations and I about mine.

We set up the decoy in Illinois. No real reason I suppose, except that most of us are allergic to desert, the logical place to build spaceport and ships. Deserts are hot, dry and bright, and there are few humans there. In our own way we're fond of men, though they may not think so.

Illinois it was, and if there was a note of incongruity in it, so much the better. A spaceship looked strange in the middle of the flat cornfields? Very well, it did. Let the robot investigator find out why it was there.

The creation was not difficult. There was a haze in the air and the fields were green, and the spaceship pointed a sleek nose toward the sky. It was impalpable from below. A farmer plowed right through the stern tubes without knowing they were there. An inconvenience only; we blacked him out as seen from above. The farmhouse we converted into a control tower and the barn became a disembarkation structure.

There were side manifestations of course. Dogs growled uneasily and barked, then ran away and hid in the woods. Roosters could not crow nor hens lay eggs. Milk curdled, in cows and cans, and all the butter turned rancid. Unfortunately we don't often use our entire minds—and when we do there are peripheral effects. However, no human in the area noticed us, and life went on pretty much as usual.

Radio reception was poor over all North America, and television was disrupted for a thousand miles. The disruption was deliberately planned. We had to attract the attention of the saucers, and that was the easiest way to do it. The radiation was supposed to represent a power leak from our hypothecated interstellar drive.

They came the second night and it was good they did. The strain was telling on everyone in the project. It's not easy to keep up such a big illusion.

The flight of saucers wheeled across the sky, lights out and undoubtedly ready for action. They had located us all right, and they

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wanted to see just what it was we had. But they couldn't find out from the air no matter how many times they passed over.

It must have been quite a jolt. They had earth all pegged down to the last improvement in a self locking nut. And suddenly here was something new which didn't belong.

Toward midnight, with five of them still skimming the clouds, the sixth came down. I was ready, and had everything I needed with me. The saucer landed in a field a half mile away. The vegetation burned invisibly where it settled. A section of the saucer opened, and a much littler saucer came out.

The little saucer was a robot. I was sure of that the instant I saw it, mostly because it had wheels. There is nothing to indicate that a life form can't have wheels, but it does pose a nice problem of what a living creature will use for bearings. It was a robot then, and it came out and headed for our ship, which was still holding together splendidly, needle nose aimed at the sky.

It was time for me to go to work. I started toward the big saucer.

"It's coming closer." This was the thought of the individual who had created the ship out of his own dematerialized atoms.

"Put out a force field and keep it away." He sounded shaky and I thought a wry jest would help. The containers I was carrying were heavy.

The ship snorted. "I wish I could. But seriously, how long do I have to stay here?"

"Keep it up," I said. "I've got lots of supplies."

The terror in his voice was real. "I don't like that thing. It's snooping around."

"Waken the farmer. Maybe he'll kick up a disturbance and the robot will investigate."

With a shotgun the farmer couldn't do much, but a lucky shot might put a wheel out of commission. The robot wouldn't like that.

"I can't make the farmer open his eyes. The saucer put him to sleep and I can't touch his mind."

The saucers had a good brand of hypnotism, if that's what it was. We knew they had space travel, and now it was evident that they were equally advanced in other ways.

"Use your judgment," I told the ship. "Hold it as long as you can and then pretend to go out into space, or forward in time. Anything that will look good."

I needed time. I could have dematerialized where I stood, and rematerialized inside the saucer. But if I did, I would have to leave most of my supplies behind. A short journey, I had said. And that was true—short as far as interstellar distances were concerned. But it would be long by normal methods of reckoning, and

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I had to live through it. I couldn't abandon my supplies.

I succeeded in transporting all the food to a place just outside the large saucer before our ship disappeared. It didn't go out into space, nor into time as I expected. Instead it sank rapidly into the ground, and left no hole behind. This, I think, confused the robot. I heard it thrashing around in the cornfield, possibly in bewilderment.

I gathered some of the containers and carried them inside the saucer. It was lighted all right, and the lighting scheme was as weird as the interior. They used the spectrum below the red, and above the violet. Why this should be so I don't know. I merely report what I found. Apparently they didn't react to what we consider visible light.

I adjusted my eyes.

I found an empty space which I assumed was for the storage of specimens. I put my food in there. Outside I went for more, and then back again. I repeated my trips until everything was loaded. Unpalatable food, of course, concentrated and not tasty, but it would last until I stepped out on the planet at the opposite end. After that there would be other problems.

I went outside for the last communication with my fellows. The ship I could examine later. I looked around. The control tower and disembarkation structure were still visible, though they were wavering in the dim light.

"Are you there?" I thought.

"I am." The control tower thought back. "I wish I wasn't."

"It's just a robot," I said reassuringly. "It's not interested in a building."

"Maybe not," conceded the control tower. "But it's inside, examining sleeping people. I wish it would go away."

He was losing control of himself and that didn't suit my purpose. "It's just a machine. Hold on for a little longer."

He held on.

The robot left the illusionary control tower and headed toward the saucer. For a squat ungainly contrivance it covered the distance in an amazing fashion. I had barely time to get inside before it rumbled into the saucer. It was carrying something. We took off before I could see what it was.

We left earth smoothly, though any kind of takeoff would have suited me. Inertia had never been my problem. Neither was the possibility that the robot would discover me. I was certain I didn't register on light sensitive cells, and I had other tricks I could use if I had to.

The robot had tentacles I hadn't noticed before because they had been retracted. They weren't retracted now, and they held a farmer. He was unconscious.

The robot was monkeying around with the farmer, but it was

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hardly the time to interfere. Needles stabbed the farmer in several places. Withdrawing the blood and storing it, probably inside the robot.

The first needles were jerked out, and replaced by others. Again this was logical: pumping a fluid into the farmer's veins with the intent of suspending the life force until they reached the home planet.

The whole procedure made sense. When the robot couldn't find the spaceship it had taken someone in the vicinity for questioning. They'd be surprised what they'd learn from the farmer though. Absolutely nothing! We had protected ourselves too well. The farmer's ordeal had no bearing on the success of *my* enterprise. Nevertheless I became slightly ill at the waste involved.

The robot dropped the farmer in a place similar to the one in which I had hidden my supplies. Then it crouched down and became motionless, waiting. There was nothing for it to do.

Nor for myself either. We were out of the atmosphere and on our way.

The journey was six months of monotony. Avoiding the robot was easy because it didn't move. The ship was all mine but I couldn't make use of it. I puttered around, but there was nothing much to learn. The drive was in operation, and as long as it was, I couldn't get close. I had no idea of what it was nor how it worked, but the force that surrounded it was, for me at least, an absolute barrier.

The rest of the saucer was equally confounding. There were several low ceilinged compartments which held instruments at whose functions I could not guess. There were no star charts anywhere, but I had to assume the ship knew where it was going.

Whatever our destination, we were approaching it faster than light. Occasionally I looked out of the vision ports, and what I saw didn't resemble suns, though of course they were. It was the light shaft which changed their appearance.

One day the saucer gave a lurch and we were simultaneously below the speed of light, and near our goal. Dead ahead was a multiple star system. Where it lay with relation to Earth I don't know. Within fifty to a thousand light years I suppose.

For the first time in months the robot stirred, went to the farmer and began to work on him. I kept out of the way. It seemed the sensible thing to do. No matter how often I looked, I couldn't determine the location of the planet toward which we were bound. The ship knew, but I was in ignorance.

From behind, in the next compartment, came the labored sounds of the robot. Then there was another sound and it didn't come

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from the robot. I looked in. The farmer sat up, gazed around, understood some or little of what he saw. That understanding was enough for him. He collapsed. He was still breathing, though; in spasmodic gasps.

The revivification was a complete success. I decided to keep the man in mind. He was an important source of reserve strength.

My hopes leapt high when I saw the planet. It was something less than the size of Saturn, but much larger than Earth. It was large enough to support a tremendous population. I hadn't bargained for anything so good.

I had only a vague plan to go by. I had made the journey in complete safety, and that was most important. My next move would depend on circumstances. I could dematerialize myself off the ship, and onto the planet. With an extreme expenditure of energy I could even take the remainder of my food supply with me.

But it didn't seem worth the effort. I had done all right so far by remaining quiet, and letting events occur as they would. I decided to see it through on the same basis. I stayed in the ship, and let it land.

That was not my first mistake, landing with the ship. If anything, the error began a thousand years earlier, in my infancy, the first night I saw the light of the moon. No one asked me to come. I did it voluntarily, for reasons my total personality found acceptable. In my own mind I added up the advantages in leaving Earth, and then schemed until I found a way to do it.

I had been dissatisfied with the way things were going among men. I objected to blood spilled uselessly. And so I had contrived an escape. Greener pastures? Not exactly. I don't like salads. Still the saying conveys something of the way I felt. Long before the ship landed it was too late, though I didn't know it.

The robot scurried about the saucer, chirruping mechanically and creaking. When it finished the duties it picked up the farmer, and carried him out. The man was still unconscious, but he began to scream.

Soon after it left, other robots came into the ship. Slightly different from the kind I had seen, they must have been repair robots. They went about tasks that were unfamiliar to me, and they talked.

This was new. I couldn't understand what they said until I found the speech center of one, and let my mind reach out, lightly.

"A master says there is a stowaway on one of the ships."

It was unforeseen. Nothing I had encountered could detect my existence without registering on my consciousness. These *masters* were going to be tougher than humans. I waited while the other replied:

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"Do they know what ship he's on?"

My robot waved a tentacle. "There are ten thousand ships here, each waiting for a checkover before reassignment. Would they bother to search each ship?"

"Physically, you mean?" asked the other. "No. They will take him off as the ship leaves."

Getting me off was going to take some doing, though the *masters* didn't know it. They may have gauged humans correctly, but they hadn't met me. Nevertheless I was uneasy.

"Why does he stay on the ship?" asked my robot.

The other chuckled. "Maybe he's changed his mind, and wants to go home. He'll be surprised when he learns where he's bound for."

I'll admit I panicked then—because a robot chuckled. It's not the friendly sound you might think. And also because of what it said. I had no intention of going home, but I liked to think I could if I wanted to. Now I saw that, due to their system of rotating assignments, it was next to impossible to determine which ship was going back to Earth. I made up my mind quickly.

Several things happened simultaneously. I dematerialized myself where I was, and rematerialized tenuously inside the robot. At the same time I took control of its motor and brain centers.

I forced it away from the job, and commanded it to go to the storage space where the last of my food was hidden. The other robot didn't notice. I surmised they didn't take orders from each other but from someone above. For the moment *I* was above.

Out of the ship we went, and into the confusion of the repair shops. Nothing but ships and robots, and I'd had enough of these.

I needed a hiding place to rest, and plan my forays against the creatures of this planet. I rummaged hurriedly through the robot brain, and learned that we were near the edge of a large city. Without cataloguing all the information I received, I forced the robot through obscure alleys toward the open plain that surrounded the city.

It was cramped and uncomfortable inside the robot even though I didn't exist as solid matter. And I had to operate blind. I couldn't adjust my sight to that of the robot, and had to function once removed from reality, through its incomplete senses.

The last alley we entered ended on the open plain. The robot rolled down it—and stopped. I couldn't see what was in front of us, but I could guess—one of the creatures of the planet, the things that made the flying saucers. Without hesitation I directed the robot to attack.

It didn't.

It's refusal was not unexpected.

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They would have been quite insane to build robots without installing some safeguards. It meant, however, that the next step was up to me. I took it.

I dematerialized out of the robot and rematerialized facing my antagonist. On the average it takes me a few microseconds to evaluate a foe, and find his weakness. I looked longer than that. It was the first time I had seen anything that could destroy at a glance my confidence in my own survival capacity.

And there was no weakness.

What I did then was not cowardice, it was pure survival, the reaction of a nervous system shocked to the limits of endurance. I dematerialized myself from where I stood and rematerialized far out on the open plain. Twice I repeated the process until the city was out of sight over the horizon. The creature didn't follow, though it could have done so easily enough—if it had wanted to.

I know my strength. On Earth it's the source of legends—the shadowy half-believed stories of werewolves and vampires. Fact and fancy mixed together to chill the minds and hearts of men. For myself, and others like me, it's a distinct advantage to have our existence doubted. A victim paralyzed with fear, too shocked and demoralized to cry out, is easier to subdue.

But the strength I was so confident of is meaningless here. Crouched in the shadow of the boulder, the only shade on the arid plain, it suddenly dawned on me that the creatures who rule this planet knew about me from the beginning, when I thought I was hidden. It amused them, I think.

I can't go back to the city and find the farmer. He's their meat. And I have limitations. I can't dematerialize myself off this planet. A few drops of fluid are left in the container with the Red Cross stamp on it, my last link with Earth.

I was born knowing the facts of *my* life. For a thousand years I've taken my food where, and how I could get it. But these creatures are different, not only in body chemistry. They are tougher than teflon skin and have hydrofluoric acid in their veins. I've always killed for food, but they—kill for pleasure. And their appearance exactly coincides with their character. I ought to know.

But there's one escape they forgot about, and I will take it. When they come hunting, they won't find me. Self-destruction is preferable to meeting those horrors face to face again.

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universe in books

by . . . Robert Frazier

Our hard-hitting reviewer spots the newest trends and tells you how to spend your money wisely.

SIX GREAT SHORT NOVELS OF SCIENCE FICTION edited by Groff Conklin. *Dell.* 35c.

In the introduction to this twelfth anthology, Groff Conklin states: "These are not just the best of the current month or even the current year; they are among the best science fiction novelettes ever published."

Will reading them corroborate or disprove his contention?

Best in the lot is Theodore Sturgeon's "Maturity"—the agonizing plight of a late-developing, super-gifted genius struggling to attain maturity. Although this idea has wonderful potentialities which could have been exploited more fully, we nevertheless get a strong flavor of the author's sensitive personality in this tragic tale of a superman born in our midst.

It is the only story with a really familiar environment; all the others are straight science-imagination, compounded of literally fantastic possibilities.

"Coventry" by Robert A. Heinlein is a competent handling of a future dictatorship and a new

A good many of the books reviewed in this issue are anthologies. While none are laudatory, they are recommended as a group. Not so much for their intrinsic value but because they possess more interest than the many fair s-f novels printed these days. Novels of the stature of Bernard Wolfe's LIMBO, *Pohl & Kornbluth's* SPACE MERCHANTS, *Philip Farmer's* THE LOVERS, *Alfred Bester's* DEMOLISHED MAN *and Ward Moore's* BRING THE JUBILEE, *were few and far between in the many books published last year.*

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psychological treatment of criminals. Although his ending fades away, Heinlein's characters are ordinary human beings. His well-wrought tale gives the impression of being a factual article. Occassionally it becomes diffuse and suffers considerably by not beginning with the original story to which "Coventry" is a sequel.

"The Blast" is Stuart Cloete's narrative of a seemingly lone survivor of an atomic holocaust which wipes out civilization. He presents an intimate picture—packed with ideas and social criticism—of world-wide ruin, all the more vivid for its sense of immediacy. It is interesting though not as well written as some of his books. Having previously appeared as a two-part serial in COLLIER'S, its chief value in this anthology is to preserve it in a compact form for collectors.

"The Other World" by Murray Leinster is a good, action-packed adventure on the parallel worlds theme, acceptable for an hour's entertainment. A brutal, feudal civilization lives off the sweat of slaves kidnaped from our world and provides an uncomfortable explanation of what happens to our missing persons.

In "Surface Tension," after a rather slow start, James Blish presents a novel situation of an underwater civilization of microscopic men working out their destiny by sending up a marine equivalent of a spaceship to explore the vast world above them.

In "Barrier," Anthony Boucher writes of a time traveler and his strange encounters with an anti-democratic society of tomorrow. While smoothly written, it reads like the work of a man who is not overly fond of his theme and is going through the motions of setting down the fundamentals of a s-f story, fighting every bit of the way to extend his wordage.

Four of these six novelettes have already been anthologized in hardcover books. Although they are not the "greatest" short novels ever published, all are well above average in entertainment value. It is certainly one of the best anthologies in recent months.

TOMORROW'S UNIVERSE, edited by H. J. Campbell. *Hamilton & Co.*, London. $1.35.

England, where many hardcover novels were published long before it became the vogue in this country, has been lax in publishing anthologies. A year ago Ted Carnell published an excellent collection of science fiction by British authors—the first to come from England. Now, bearded H. J. Campbell has put together the second s-f anthology to originate in Great Britain—this one a collection of tales by American authors.

In this volume there are eight short stories by such notables as A. E. van Vogt, L. Sprague de Camp, Chad Oliver, Kris Neville,

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Charles L. Harness and Milton Lesser. They forecast the myriad problems that may arise with our conquest of space . . . interplanetary social injustice, robots, space and time travel.

Finest story in the book is Ross Rocklynne's poignant description of how loneliness became an instinct in "The Immortal." It is surprising that American anthologists have overlooked it. Indeed, *none* of these stories appear in our collections and are, therefore, safe bets from the standpoint of avoiding duplication.

Second best is Charles L. Harness' "Heritage"—an original tale of man's desperate struggle for survival against a new race of physically superior men. The author leaves dangling in mid-space the fate of the last male and female *Homo sapien* fleeing inevitable extinction on Earth. Doomed to grow old and die while hurtling through interstellar space, they were adjured to train their sons and daughters in the mysteries of deep space so that one day they might claim their rightful heritage, not Terra nor this galaxy, "but the universe."

Will slave labor exist on other stars? Milton Lesser believes this likely in "Exterran"—a term describing extraterrestrial beings (inhabiting other planets) who are cruelly exploited and spurned simply because they are different from us. Lesser is preoccupied with dramatizing today's social problems, occasionally at the expense of his narrative.

"The Shore of Tomorrow" by Chad Oliver shows us how much real effort will be needed to bring about harmony between ourselves and inhabitants of other worlds.

Scintillating L. Sprague de Camp presents a humorous account of strife between earthmen and aliens in "The Soaring Statute."

A. E. van Vogt, who developed the mutant and superman themes to their ultimate in SLAN, encounters an amazing new life-form in "M33 In Andromeda."

Concern with tomorrow's world is a recurrent theme of modern science fiction and all eight yarns give you a chilling glimpse into tomorrow's problems. Don't miss this English collection. Its low price more than compensates for any of its narrative limitations.

THE EDITORS CHOICE IN SCIENCE FICTION, Edited by Sam Moskowitz. The McBride Co. $3.50.

The idea behind this collection, was to have the editors of magazines publishing science fiction (past and present), each select a story from the pages of their publication which had never been anthologized before, with an introduction giving their reasons for making their choice. The result is excellent. The incredible thing was that anthologists had left so many truly outstanding stories

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escape their notice—uncollected.

From BLUEBOOK magazine, Donald Kennicott selected "Wall of Fire," unquestionably one of the most graphic and dramatically written end-of-the-world stories we have ever read, written by Jack Kirkland, world-famous playwright who adapted *Tobacco Road* to the theatre; from WEIRD TALES, Editor Dorothy McIlwraith produced "Far Below" by Robert Barbour Johnson, as powerful a blending of science fiction and horror as will probably ever be written; from the late, lamented UNKNOWN, John W. Campbell came up with Mona Farnsworth's "All Roads," which vies with Mary Gnaedingers FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERY selection "Demoiselle d'Ys" by Robert W. Chambers for beauty and poignancy of the theme and presentation. Two long novelettes in this book, richly reward the space they occupy. They are: "Death of a Sensitive" by Harry Bates, which is a polished masterpiece that will probably become the classic story on extra-sensory perception in science fiction and "What Thin Partitions" by Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides, which is an adroit blending of antigravity and poltergeists. Space does not permit lauding all the fine stories by Arthur C. Clarke, Eando Binder, Frank Belknap Long, Chester D. Cuthbert, Otis Adelbert Kline, Wilson Tucker and others which fill out this collection.

Sam Moskowitz deserves credit for assembling this grand collection of notable editors, writers and, most of all, the fine stories. Moskowitz, who has been an editor and author himself, in addition is listed by the Who's Who people as an outstanding authority on the History of Science Fiction and by A. Bowker as possessor of one of the worlds great collections of science fiction. The thought, planning and effort that went into the book is self-evident. In these days when the average anthologist contents himself with two or three good selections to lead off his book and fills the rest with average fare, this anthology, from the standpoint of quality, is an achievement. It belongs on your bookshelf.

SPACE LAWYER by Nat Schachner. Gnome Press, N. Y. $2.75.

The great story teller, Nat Schachner, who abandoned science fiction to write some brilliant biographies, has happily come back with an original science-fiction novel dealing with big business. The brash young hero is shanghied aboard a spaceship owned by his sweetheart's tycoon father. The hero always comes up with tricky points of interplanetary law to solve the many problems that arise. Good job.

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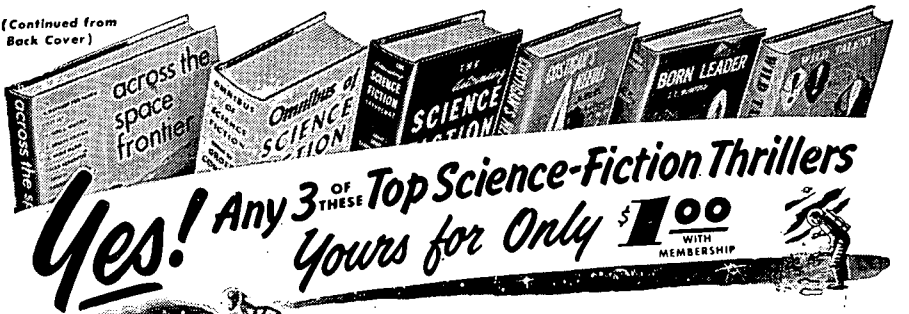

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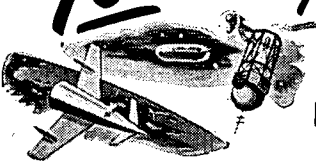

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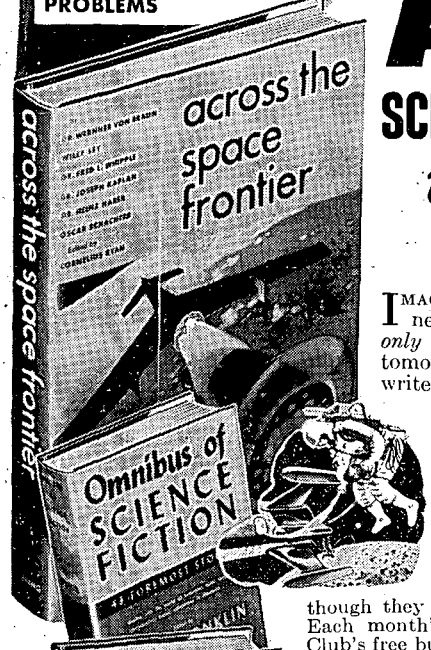

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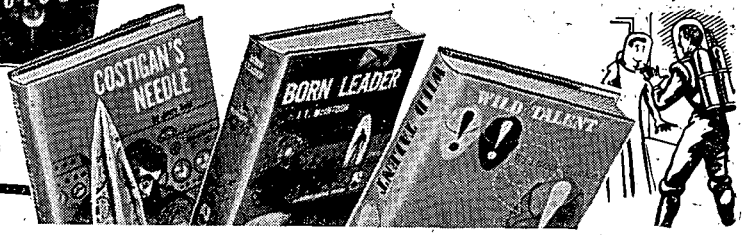

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